THE HAND OF POWER

Frank Neiderlander
515 N. West. Ave.
Kalamazoo,
Michigan.

THE HAND OF POWER

The Novels of
EDGAR WALLACE

THE MURDER BOOK OF J. G. REEDER
THE CLEVER ONE
THE GIRL FROM SCOTLAND YARD
THE BLACK ABBOT
THE DARK EYES OF LONDON
CAPTAINS OF SOULS
THE FEATHERED SERPENT
A KING BY NIGHT
THE FACE IN THE NIGHT
THE TWISTER
THE HAND OF POWER
THE PEOPLE
THE INDIA RUBBER MEN
GUNMAN'S BLUFF
THE TERRIBLE PEOPLE
TERROR KEEP
THE FLYING SQUAD
THE RINGER
THE CRIMSON CIRCLE
THE SQUEALER
THE THREE JUST MEN
THE BLACK
THE TRAITOR'S GATE
THE AVENGER
THE MAN FROM MOROCCO
THE DOUBLE
THE MISSING MILLION
ROOM 13

THE HAND OF POWER

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

THE MYSTERY LEAGUE, INC.
PUBLISHERS 1930 NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY
THE MYSTERY LEAGUE, INC.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA
FIRST EDITION

CONTENTS

THE MEN OF THE MOOR *Page 9*
DR. LAFFIN COMMANDS *Page 12*
PAWTER'S SERVICES *Page 18*
CAPTAIN HARVEY HALE *Page 22*
BENSON *Page 28*
BETTY CONSENTS *Page 33*
AT THAMES HEAD *Page 38*
THE PROUD SONS *Page 44*
NO-ARREST BULLOTT *Page 49*
THE DESK STORE *Page 54*
MR. LAMBERT STONE *Page 62*
THE MAN FROM NOWHERE *Page 67*
THE MESSAGE *Page 72*
THE LOCKED ROOM *Page 75*
GETTING IN *Page 78*
THE NOVITIATES *Page 84*
BROTHER JOHN *Page 88*
A SHOT IN THE STREET *Page 92*
THE MAN IN CHARGE *Page 96*
THE INITIATION *Page 100*
JENNY HAMSHAW *Page 103*
DR. LAFFIN'S OFFER *Page 107*
GONE! *Page 110*
THE DREAM *Page 113*
BETTY DOES NOT REMEMBER *Page 119*
A TALK WITH DR. LAFFIN *Page 126*
RAGOUSA TALK *Page 131*
THE SEEN PRIOR *Page 137*

A Strange Occurrence *Page 142*
Dope *Page 144*
In Epping Forest *Page 149*
Toby Marsh Goes to a Party *Page 158*
The Listener in the Chimney *Page 166*
Mr. Pawter Explains *Page 170*
The Priory *Page 174*
The Grand Prior Shows His Hand *Page 181*
A Trip to Devon *Page 184*
A Man and a Maid *Page 188*
The Test *Page 191*
The Woman with the Jug *Page 194*
Florette Complains *Page 199*
An Additional Passenger *Page 206*
On Board the "Escorial" *Page 210*
Betty's Fear *Page 211*
"Sir John and Lady Wilford" *Page 217*
The Blue Bottle *Page 225*
An Attack in the Night *Page 229*
A Radio from New York *Page 235*
Bullott Explains *Page 241*
The Evening of the Ball *Page 247*
The Control *Page 254*
Changed Conditions *Page 264*
Bill Has a Plan *Page 266*
In the Wireless House *Page 273*
The "Thomas Inland" *Page 278*
Harvey Hale and Laffin *Page 283*
Warships *Page 285*
Toward the Fog *Page 291*
The Siren *Page 296*
The Man in Control *Page 302*
Bullott Makes an Arrest *Page 309*
Bullott's Story *Page 313*

THE HAND OF POWER

THE MEN OF THE MOOR

A GALE of wind and rain swept across the barren face of Dartmoor, that ancient desolation. The howl and shriek of it came to Betty Carew above the rattle and roar of the motor engine as the old car grunted and groaned up the steep hill.

The lights of Tavistock had long since disappeared. Princetown was three miles beyond the crest of the hill. About them was an infinite loneliness, and the sobbing of wind that drove the needle-sharp sleet into their faces. The yellow-faced old man who drove did not speak—he had not spoken since they left Tavistock; would not willingly break his silence before they reached Exeter—or after.

The car laboured up the twisting road, skidding and sliding from left to right, and with every lurch the girl's heart came into her mouth.

At the top of the hill the full force of the gale caught them and all but brought the car to a stand-still. Rain smacked viciously against the screen, whipped under the lowered brim of her hat, thrashing her face till it smarted intolerably.

"Don't you think we'd be wise if we went back to Tavistock?"

She had to raise her voice to a scream before he heard her.

"No!"

The answer came like a pistol shot, and she said no more.

Dr. Laffin had bought the car cheap at a sale of Army

derelicts—it had been old before the requisitions of war had called it for military service. It served him well enough; gave him the illusion of economy at a moment when economy was necessary. He had a small starveling property on the edge of the moor, a farm where a ploughshare touched rock every rood or so. His tenant was a man who complained regularly and paid his rent occasionally. The further illusion of proprietorship almost compensated Dr. Laffin for other deficiencies.

West of Princetown, the wind slackened and normal speech was possible.

"You won't try to get beyond Exeter to-night?" asked the girl nervously. It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that he would continue the journey to London.

"I don't know." His tone was uncompromising.

Betty could have said something unpleasant, but wisely held her tongue. They skirted the prison fields; the lights of the car showed momentarily the ugly arch before the jail, and a muffled figure leaning upon a rifle beyond the gate; and in another minute they had passed through Princetown and were facing the winds of the open moor.

In spite of her oilskin coat, the girl was soaked through; she was cold and stiff and hungry, and for the first time in her life thought longingly of the grim house in Camden Road. Then, to her surprise, the man spoke.

"This is better than play-acting . . . living reality . . . there are spirits in this place . . . I can feel them. Hail thou!"

His hand came off the driving wheel and was raised in stiff salute. Betty, shivering with terror, shut her eyes.

Play-acting! If that wretched road engagement hadn't come to an abrupt end—at Tavistock of all places in the world, and, by a hideous coincidence, at the very moment Joshua Laffin was making a half-yearly visit to his "property"!

"There are evil things chained to the dark!" His voice prim, emotionless, pierced the whine and flurry of gale and engine. "Terrors undreamt of by shallow minds

. . . what of the forty million spirits of Atlantis?"

She put her hands to her ears, and the next moment could have shrieked her fears. Ahead of them gleamed a red spot of light in the very centre of the road. It was like a fiery eye glowering from some cyclopean socket.

The car jangled and shuddered to a standstill before she saw the figure with the red lantern.

The lights of the car were poor, aged oil-burning lamps, and the man who had swung the lantern showed dimly. He seemed to be dressed in a long, close-fitting gown like the habit of a monk. . . . Her mouth opened wide in wonder and fear—the head was shrouded in a cowl that covered the face—and she saw only a gleam of eyes behind narrow slits cut in the cloth.

"May I speak to you, please?" said the cowled man, and now she saw that he had a companion, a sombre companion similarly attired.

"What is it? . . . What is the meaning of this foolery?" grated Joshua Laffin.

The man walked to his side and said something in a tone so low that Betty could not hear a word.

"Huh . . . well, I am . . ."

Laffin's voice sank to a rumble, and for a minute or two they carried on a conversation in an undertone.

"I'll draw the car up by the side of the road," said Dr. Laffin, and, twisting his head toward the girl: "You'll wait here."

"Here!" she said, aghast. "In the middle of Dartmoor . . . alone!"

"This gentleman will look after you—there is no occasion for panic. I would not leave you if there were."

He indicated the shadowy form of the second "monk" standing just outside the spread of the lamp's rays.

Betty made no answer, but watched Laffin and his sinister companion till they disappeared in the darkness.

The second man did not stir. Vainly she tried to keep her eyes away from the cowled face.

Laffin had been gone a quarter of an hour, when there came a sound that added to the fearfulness of the night.

The deep boom of a bell . . . She tried to locate it and failed.

Dong!

Again, and then . . .

The faint sound of voices—deep-chested voices of men chanting.

Dong!

She was trembling in every limb. What did all this portend? She looked around nervously. The man still stood where he had been, watching—what? She had a feeling that he was listening too, his ears strained—for what?

An hour passed before she heard feet on the hard road and somebody saying "Good-night." It was the doctor and he was returning alone: he must have left his guide somewhere in the darkness. When she looked, the second man had disappeared.

Laffin cranked up his car and climbed in.

"Who were they?" she asked.

He did not reply, and the car jerked on its way. She had added one more to the many questions he never answered.

Fifteen months later he offered a solution to the riddle of the moor: but this she did not know.

DR. LAFFIN COMMANDS

Betty Carew listened, aghast. In that gloomy, dusty room, ill-lit, badly ventilated, redolent of musty paper and ancient leather bindings, she had heard many fantastic views and commands expressed by Dr. Joshua Laffin, but never one so bizarre as this.

"I don't quite understand." She was speaking no more than the truth. "Why do you wish me to do this?"

He took a pinch of snuff from a tortoiseshell box, replaced the box on the table and leant back in his high-backed chair, his dark eyes fixed on hers. He wore his customary black, and in the candle-light and against the

dark background he was just a long, yellow face and a pair of lined, thin hands that moved restlessly.

"I give you neither 'why' nor 'wherefore'," he said, in a queer voice that had something of the softer tones of an owl in it; the whoo-ing of a man who habitually spoke through lips that were pursed as if to whistle. "I command. You know me, Elizabeth. I will have my way. Especially now. One has had disappointments; certain plans have miscarried. In this last matter there must be no hitch. As you know, I am but the servant of others—not of this plane."

He waved his hand to the shadowy corners of the room, and the girl experienced all the old terror that this gloomy house had inspired in her during the fourteen years she had been an inmate.

"Here is Kama, the tamed Nemesis, vitalised by my genius. Here the great Manasuputra, divine force of beneficence," he said. "You, who might have become acquainted with these mysteries, preferred the transient pleasure of sense."

An old story and an old reproach that left her unperturbed.

"My immeasurable superiority to the world," he went on, "and, therefore, to its opinions, should have helped you to overcome any stupid qualms. You are vain, you are conceited, just as all girls with a title to prettiness are vain and conceited. Your ego is distorted. Contact with me, which would have humbled most people, has merely puffed you up with pride. I am not even flattered. I would wish that my greatness abashed you. But no! Charity child, workhouse child, though no decent man or woman could know the truth about you without shrinking in horror, you persist in opposing your wishes, your 'whys' to my instructions. Gutter brat, gallows child, scum of the very dregs, I cannot teach you humility!"

He did not raise his voice in anger; the epithets fell in his cold tones, like the tappings of rain upon glass.

She was neither distressed nor amused. The candlelight played upon the mouldings of a spiritual face, sin-

gularly lovely. Another mystery than that he spoke about was in the shadowed eyes, mystery in the dusky shadings of her throat. Only the glory of her hair persisted, as superior to the meagre illumination as Dr. Laffin was to the world.

Dr. Laffin saw nothing of beauty in her through his hard, brown eyes.

"I may be all these things," said Betty calmly, "and yet feel a natural diffidence at sitting in a shop window for people to gape at me. I see no sense in it. I don't profess to be a great actress—I know I'm not—but I love my profession too much to let it down in the way you suggest. What am I supposed to advertise?"

A gesture answered her.

"That doesn't matter, I suppose? Well, I'll not do it."

She got up slowly from the side of the worn writing-table, resolution in the poise of her head, the set of her fine mouth.

"Good night," said Laffin, not rising. "You will find your way out. I am going to take my ten. Close the door carefully."

She never expected him to say any more than this. For a second she looked down at him, her lips curled, a bitter loathing in her heart for the man who had tortured her childhood with fear, and had blasted her future to humour his whim. His head was drooping—the "ten" had overtaken him—that ten minutes of sleep so profound that nothing had ever awakened him. How helpless he was now! For one wild, mad moment she stood over him, her hands clenched, trembling in her impotent anger, and then, wrenching herself free from the hate that gripped her, she ran out of the room, down the uncarpeted stairs and into the street. The door boomed behind her.

"I hope he heard it in his dreams," she said.

The tall man who had been waiting for her at the garden gate laughed softly.

"That sounds vicious," he said.

"You like him, Clive?"

Clive Lowbridge chuckled as he helped her into the little coupé that had been waiting outside.

"Yes—in a way. His pomposity doesn't annoy me, because he is sincere. He really does think he is the greatest man in the world."

"How did you come to know him?"

Clive did not answer until he had brought the car on to the main road and had dodged a fast-moving tramcar.

"That fellow is exceeding all road-car limits," he growled savagely. "What were you saying? I've known him all my life. He was the family physician. The home of our illustrious family used to be in Bath, and the Laffins have been our doctors for hundreds of years. It is a sort of tradition. He was my tutor—did you know that? Laffin's clever. Most of these weird birds are. You're glad to be away from that menage, aren't you, Betty?"

"Yes."

"He's a queer devil. My uncle used to swear by him, and so did my great-uncle, the seventh baron——"

She interrupted him, obviously anxious to turn the subject.

"How do your new honours sit upon you, Clive—heavily?"

The ninth Lord Lowbridge was mildly amused.

"The honours are a featherweight, but the mortgages—phew! How Uncle Ferrers got rid of his money, heaven knows! At least, heaven and the accountants! We always thought he was immensely wealthy. I fear it is art or nothing with me, but I shall be obliged to paint one masterpiece a year to pay the interest on the mortgages."

She laughed softly.

"Your celebration party was premature."

He grinned again as he sent the car whizzing through the gates of Regent's Park, narrowly avoiding a sedate limousine.

"La Florette," he said tersely, as he glimpsed the woman in its blazing interior. "That woman just hates being unnoticed! Why she doesn't have her name in

lights on the top of the car is a standing wonder to me. You know her, of course?"

Betty Carew made a little face in the dark. She knew La Florette very well, only too well.

"Poor Clive!" she said. "A lord without money is a pathetic creature! Not so pathetic, perhaps, as an ambitious actress who is doomed to be a showgirl—at least, that is what I'm going to be if Robespierre has his way."

"Robespierre—oh, you mean the doctor? He *does* look like the sea-green incorruptible now that you mention the fact. What does he want you to do?"

"He has one of his mad schemes—I am to accept an engagement from a man who wishes to advertise a desk. He mentioned a desk early in the conversation, so I suppose that is what it is."

"But how?"

"I am to sit in a store window for four hours a day—the window is to be built furnished like a study—wearing a green dress, and writing, or pretending to write, at the desk, on which"—she laughed in spite of her anger—"will be a jade vase with one red rose. Can you imagine it?"

Clive Lowbridge did not answer for a long time.

"Do you think he's mad?" he asked.

"I'm sure—there is no question about it—and oh! there is another thing! A man will one day come to me and ask me for 'the message' and I am to give him a letter which will be kept in the top right-hand drawer of the desk."

"He *is* mad," said Lowbridge emphatically, "and of course you'll do nothing of the kind, Betty."

"I don't know. I may be obliged . . ."

"Obliged! Jumping cats! I'll talk to him if he starts anything of that kind. The future Lady Lowbridge isn't going to figure in a puppet show."

She squeezed his arm affectionately.

"Clive, you've other things to think about than marriage—and so have I, my dear. Do you know Pips?"

"Orange or lemon?" he asked, as he helped her alight.

"Pips—Pawter's Intensive Publicity Service? They are advertisers and press agents. And they have the further handicap of employing the most insufferable young man in London. Clive, that youth haunts me! I'm sure the doctor has engaged him to shadow me."

"What is his name—I mean the objectionable young man?"

"Holbrook—W. Holbrook. I suppose that the 'W' stands for William. Mr. van Campe calls him 'Bill,' and so do most people round the theatre. If you ever have the chance will you squash him for me, Clive, dear?"

"He's squashed," said Clive solemnly, and brushed her cheek with his lips.

An hour later he was standing before his mirror, fastening his dress tie with great care, a frown on his pink face. A good-looking young man, with the classic features that the old Greek sculptors gave to the heroes of mythology, he had the clear eyes and the frame of a trained athlete. A series of accidents had brought him from the obscurity and poverty of a Chelsea apartment, where he won a precarious livelihood from painting landscapes of dubious originality, to the lordship of Lowbridge and the attenuated income of estates so heavily encumbered that it was difficult to find a labourer's tumbledown cottage that did not represent collateral security against an overdraft negotiated by his improvident uncle.

His mind alternated between Betty and the eccentric doctor, in whose house he had first met her five years before—slim, a gaunt-eyed child, watchful, suspicious, pitiably ready to shrink at a word, all too willing to humour the tyrant who was both parent and guardian.

Finishing his dressing, he rang the bell for his servant.

"Benson, you used to work in a club before you misguidedly accepted service with me?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then you ought to know everybody. I want you to discover who Holbrook is—Mr. W. Holbrook of Pawter's Publicity Service. You'll find their names in the telephone directory."

"Yes, my lord."

Benson, stocky and broad of shoulder, needed no further instructions. Half his attraction to Clive was his taciturnity.

"And, Benson," as the man was leaving the room, "my cigars have been evaporating at an alarming rate. Will you order a hundred of the cheaper brand? They need not be bad cigars—get some that suit your palate."

"Yes, my lord."

Benson was unmoved, neither apologetic nor confused. He had seen Dr. Laffin slip a bundle into his pocket the last time the doctor had called, but it was not his place to report the delinquencies of a guest.

PAWTER'S SERVICES

In the bright lexicon of Pawter, President, Chairman and Treasurer of the Pawter Intensive Publicity Service (familiarly called Pips), there was no such word as modesty.

"What most people call modesty is merely the wish that the authorship of anything nice which may be said about them in the Press, shall not be traced to them. Modesty is only a fear of ridicule. The very term, used in a newspaper interview, is evidence of blatant conceit. When a man says: 'I would rather not talk about myself,' he just means that he'd rather somebody else did it; all the same, he'd like to have the proofs to correct so that, if the reporters wrote how he killed five lions, he could make it six. Modesty . . . !"

"Is this one of those extension lectures I read about, or merely an exposition of your philosophy?" asked the patient young man who was Pawter's solitary audience. "If it is a lecture, I am bored; if it is a mere acriomatic . . ."

"A which?" Pawter was startled.

"Acriomatic. Work that into the Memory ads. you're doing. Drag in Aristotle—what right has he to be left out anyway? As I was saying, if you are practising for a

Rotarian dinner speech, go to it. I'm your assistant, underpaid and overworked, but loyal despite. This argument started about Miss Betty Carew's association with this agency. I remind you in case you've forgotten."

Mr. Pawter spun round in his chair and looked over his glasses. So doing, he lowered and exposed the crown of a very bald head.

"Are you mad?" he asked gently—so gently that it might be supposed that he rather thought it likely, and that it would be best not to arouse such homicidal tendencies as lay dormant in the bosom of his hearer.

"I'm not mad, but I'm getting mighty close to the borderline," said Bill Holbrook. "What's all this to do with modesty? And by the way, how can you bring yourself to write copy for Gro-Kwik—Nature's Natural Hair Restorer, with a nut like that? Rejuvenates Tired Follicles! And you're a churchman!"

"Never in my life," said Pawter tremulously, "has a subordinate dared to speak to me as you have spoken to-day! I would be well within my rights if I fired you into the street! Why I refrain I don't know."

Bill Holbrook took a chair, fished from his pockets a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, and adjusting them to his face, looked owlishly at his employer. Bill was twenty-three and pleasantly featured, except for a nose that was slightly bent. He played football, and once a great international had used his features as a jumping-off place.

"I'm going to tell you, Father Pips," he said solemnly. "I feel you ought to know. Yesterday you fired me, to-day you fire me—you have been firing me every day for months. But I do not go. Why? Because I'm the only man in England who understands publicity. Yes, sir. The only man. You think you do, but you don't. In me you have a genius, a man who Thinks Forward. I'm the only member of the staff who is related to you, therefore I'm the only member of the staff that has the true interest of the business at heart. When you die I shall await the reading of the last will with equanimity. You *can't* leave me out of a controlling interest."

Pawter sighed again and swung back to his original position. Bill was his first cousin, and there were times when he wished that his aunt had never married.

"Anyway, Betty Carew is not a business proposition. I've been sitting on her doorstep waiting for a chance to speak to her, but so far she has given me the genial reception that is offered to a case of mumps in a ladies' college. When I tried to speak to her, she looked round for a policeman. Where does she come into this stunt?"

"You'll discover in course of time," he said. "I can only assure you that the lady will come in."

Holbrook went back to his little office, and in his mind was a great perplexity. What had induced the girl to take this extraordinary decision? Advertising schemes and the inducements which brought well-known actresses into the advertisement columns were no mysteries to him; but this girl was not being asked to put her name to a testimonial of some excellent remedy or popular article of furniture: if she fell in with the idea, she was deliberately going out to make herself cheap.

He sat, staring with unseeing eyes at the litter on his desk, his busy mind occupied with the problem which Betty Carew's strange conduct had raised. Holbrook had no illusions about the theatrical profession; he knew something of their lives, knew something of the terrific struggle for existence which went on all the time, except among a few favourites of the public; he knew, too, how permissible it was to obtain publicity at almost any cost, but he was well aware that there was a line over which no self-respecting actor or actress would pass, and that line was far behind the place that Betty had decided to overstep in this new undertaking of hers.

And underneath and behind the grotesqueness of the scheme was a something which filled him with a vague sense of uneasiness. Somewhere, he had heard a theory expounded that life runs backward, from the end to the beginning of things; he had the sense of remembering to-morrow, and it was not a pleasant memory.

Twice before he had had the queer experience of re-

calling events that had not occurred. Once, when he was a reporter, he had been sent to a little Welsh village to interview a Cabinet Minister whose estate was near by. And on the Sunday morning he had gone to church to fill the dreary hours of waiting for the one train that could take him back to London. The service was over and he was strolling through the churchyard, when he stopped suddenly by the grave of a murdered woman whose husband, a lawyer, had been hanged for the crime. . . . He knew this, though the husband was pointed out to him later in the day as a man of great respectability, whose wife had died a natural death. A year later the lawyer was arrested and died the death in Gloucester jail.

And the desk and the red-haired actress suggested something—something terrible.

"Darn my crazy brain!" muttered Bill.

He had an appointment with Laffin that evening—he hated Saturday evening appointments, but was anxious to keep this. He wanted his Sunday free, for he had planned a trip to Thames head—Bill was something of an explorer.

Clearing up some urgent work that awaited him, he was surprised by the arrival of his chief, Mr. Pawter's weakness being a hatred of all physical exercise, and Holbrook wondered why he had made the perilous journey from his palatial office to the mean abode of genius.

"I was going to tell you, Holbrook, that I wanted you to call on Mr. Lambert Stone, the lumber millionaire, on Monday before you come to the office. Stone arrives in London to-day, and I've got the rough draft of a scheme which I think might attract him. Will you fix up an appointment?"

"Lumber?" Bill Holbrook looked dubious. "I don't see there's a selling value in that."

"There's a selling value in anything, you poor, slow-witted oaf," said Pawter, mildly offensive. "Get the appointment, and then come back to me for the scheme. You're seeing the doctor, aren't you?"

Bill nodded.

"And I wish you'd find out to-night what's behind this desk stunt," said Pawter, staring out of the window and scratching his head irritably. "The desk is nothing—I think I've said that before—and I can't imagine people spending money on the proposition in the hope of getting it back. I hate to knock a client's goods, but this old desk has all the disadvantages of most and none of the attractions of some. Get Miss Carew's views on the subject."

Bill Holbrook sneered.

"Show me an actress with real views on anything, and I'll show you a professional misfit," he said cryptically, and then: "Pips, I'll tell you what is behind that desk. Murder! I smell blood! Wilful murder . . . maybe the crime of the century!"

Mr. Pawter's round eyes were wide open.

"It is curious that you should say that," he said. "That desk was invented by a butler who was hanged in Oxford jail for killing his wife—Laffin told me so."

CAPTAIN HARVEY HALE

Outside the East India Dock Gates lies an area of squalor and meanness which has no exact parallel in any other part of London. It is a district of poor, jerry-built streets, wherein every house is exactly like every other house.

Lyme Street, which lies midway between Silvertown and Canning Town, was once distinguished by the existence within its narrow length of five distinct public-houses, all of which did a noisy trade. Temperance reformers cited Lyme Street as an object lesson and a terrible example. Visiting social reformers from other lands were led fearfully to its dingy purlieus, and novelists and playwrights sought, amidst its foul approaches, the *mise en scène* for such deeds of depravity as were necessary to the development of their creations.

Of all the saloons that disgraced a civilised city, The

Full Rigged Ship was the worst, and when this infamous house of the crimp and the harpy was purchased by The Christian Society and converted into a Temperance Home for Sailors, there was rejoicing amongst the enemies of drink.

For fourteen years the directors of "Theyome" (as it was called locally) fought a desperate fight to establish an attractive oasis in a desert of sin. All that mortal men could do, they did. There were lectures on Booze, and lectures on Gardens and how to cultivate them; there were most innocuous concerts that began with a hymn and ended with a benediction, and addresses on The Child: What Will He Become? And in spite of all these counter-attractions to the sinful saloons, the heavy trade and the bulk of patronage went to The Five Bells and The Dog Watch and similar alcoholic institutions, where nobody lectured except on the miserable pay of sailormen, and all concerts ended in a free-for-all fight which brought out the police reserves.

Eventually the uplift society "farmed" the home to a knowledgeable ex-purser, who ran it on lines that more nearly approached the seaman's ideal, in spite of his bonded undertaking that no intoxicating liquid should pass the threshold. A club license enabled him to serve surreptitious drink, and, human nature being what it is, the whisper, well circulated, that you could get a drop of good stuff at "Theyome" brought a new patronage, and in the little doorway through which innocent children had tripped to recite to the dazed marine, you could take your secret potion from sin-stained hands.

Chief of the new patrons of the establishment was Captain Harvey Hale, seventy-five by fifty coarse inches of muscle and bone; a red-faced, fishy-eyed, heavy-jawed skipper, without either ship or ticket, for he it was who piled the s.s *Gravalla* on to the Dame rocks and stood in thirty-seventy for insurance which the underwriters refused to pay.

It was a grievance which Captain Hale ventilated in moments of insobriety.

"Twelve months' hard labour—for what?" he bellowed. "For losing a ship that was a floating wreck. And me that thought first of my men and had every boat overhauled before we left Sunderland! And lifebelts all in good order and everything! 'Wilfully casting away my ship'! Not a life lost, mind you, and me the last to go over the side in accordance with regulations!"

He did not refer to certain earlier exploits that had come before the court which tried him: of a trial in Calcutta for manslaughter, of a court of inquiry at Seattle for cargo-broaching, and similar irregularities which had been investigated in other latitudes.

"Maybe they'll engage you as a rum-runner," suggested Taylor, the new host of The Home.

"Maybe that's it," he said, "and I'll do it!"

He glanced up at the clock.

"Expecting anybody?" asked the other, and Captain Hale looked at his companion suspiciously.

"Maybe," he said.

He took a letter from his pocket and read, and was in the act of replacing it when he changed his mind, and passed it across to Taylor.

Mr. Taylor fixed his glasses and read the typewritten note.

> "I can give you a good job with plenty of money, if you're willing to take on an unusual task, that will involve you in personal danger. Will you come out of the Sailors' Home in Lyme Street at 10.30? My agent, Mr. Smith, will be waiting for you."

"What do you make of that?" asked Hale.

"Rum-running," said the other promptly. "There's a syndicate in London that is making a fortune out of shipping booze to the States."

"Doesn't sound like rum-running to me, though you may be right. A poor sailor has got to take what he can get nowadays. Why, I remember the time when I was offered . . ."

He was boastfully reminiscent and talkative, till, look-

ing up, he saw the hands of the clock at the half-hour, and, rising, threw some money on the table.

"Don't go following me, Taylor," he said ominously, and Mr. Taylor, whose curiosity had been aroused, and who had already made up his mind that he would judge for himself the character and appearance of Hale's visitor, very wisely changed his mind.

There was nobody outside the club when Captain Harvey Hale went on to the street, but opposite he saw a man walking slowly up and down, and the red glow of his cigar suggested that he was the promised agent, for cigars are uncommon, except among American and Scandinavian seamen. After a moment's hesitation he crossed the road in the direction of the stranger, who turned and walked to meet him.

"You're Captain Hale? I am the man you are expecting. Will you walk with me?"

Hale glanced at him curiously. There was nothing in the appearance of the man to suggest that he was engaged in any sinister project.

"Where shall we go?" he grunted.

"Mr. Smith," who evidently knew the neighbourhood, said tersely:

"Across the railroad, toward North Woolwich."

It was he who decided the route.

"This place will do," said the man, and stopped midway between two light standards. "Hale, you're broke; you're just out of prison, and you look like going back again unless you can find a ship. I'll be frank, Captain, and I expect the same from you. You were tried in Calcutta for killing a young apprentice, and it was suggested in evidence that you had two hundred pounds from the boy's stepfather to finish him. The jury disagreed and you escaped. If you did that for two hundred, how far would you go for five thousand pounds?"

"To hell—and through," said Harvey Hale promptly. "Who do you want killed?"

"My friend, that is a big question, easy enough to ask, but hard to answer."

"I'm not going back to prison again if I can help it," growled the big man. "That's not my life. Give me any kind of job—rum-running——" he paused.

"I'm not interested in rum-running," he said, and Hale was momentarily taken aback.

"I don't care what it is," he said at last. "Give me a job with five thousand in it, and there's nothing I'll stop at. I mean what I say. I've never gone back on my promise. Look what they did to me over the sinking of that ship. I could have got the owner twenty years, but I didn't blab; and when I went in to see him this morning to get a look at the money, he threatened to call the police."

"You went to him this morning to work a little blackmail," said the other coolly. "You got a thousand to keep your mouth shut at the trial, and, like a fool, you handed it over to the lady you called your wife."

"If I ever get hold of her——"

"I daresay you'll treat her rough. But you won't: she's skipped to Canada—I know all about you, Hale; I've been studying you for the past month or two. Now the question is, are you going to work for me?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Anything and everything. Can you drive a car?"

"There isn't a car that was ever built——"

"You may be useful in that respect. And here is another point: you suggested just now that you'd commit murder for five thousand. If that's a bluff, I may call it. You'll get five thousand, and you will be asked to do things which will mean a sentence of penal servitude if you're caught. But it isn't five thousand that you're getting, Hale, if the scheme for which we want you goes through; it is fifty thousand, and a free transportation to a country where you'll never be recognised, and from which you will not be extradited."

Harvey Hale was sober now.

"Fifty thousand!" he said hoarsely. "You don't mean that?"

"I mean that and nothing less. Five thousand certain;

you can touch the money at the rate of a thousand a week. And fifty thousand if we can pull off our big job. Are you game?"

"Is there anything worse than murder?" he asked. "Because, if there is, I'll do it!"

"Walk with me," said the stranger abruptly, and turned his footsteps toward North Woolwich. "I suppose you know few people in town—few well-known people, I mean?"

"I know a judge and a lawyer or two," said Hale bitterly, "but I don't know any of the swells."

"You will probably be brought into contact with a few," his new employer continued, "and I will give you the names of some you must avoid like the plague. Do you know Lord Lowbridge? Of course you don't. He is a particularly dangerous man, who had better be left alone."

"I'm not likely to meet any lords," growled the other.

"You never know, but keep out of the sight of him. He is never to know that you're employed by me—is that understood? Now here are your instructions. You will leave the house where you're staying, buy some clothes and make yourself presentable, and then take the first train for Newton Abbot—that is in Devonshire. You will put up at a small hotel, giving out that you are a sea captain who is thinking of buying a farm. You will be able to buy a second-hand car in the neighbourhood."

"What am I supposed to do with that?" asked Hale.

"You'll get acquainted with all the roads out of Newton Abbot and across the moor; work your way to Exeter, and possibly we shall ask you to purchase a moor cottage, but it is too early to talk of that. When we want you, you will know."

He stopped under the light of a street lamp, took something wrapped in tissue paper from his waistcoat pocket, opened it carefully and displayed a small, five-pointed star. It was enamelled green, and in the centre was a golden inscription.

"Keep that," he said. "Show it to nobody—do you

understand? In due course you will find a very good use for it. One other thing: in Plymouth there is a branch of a society called The Proud Sons of Ragousa."

"I've heard about that; lots of seafaring men go in for it. They run a lottery scheme——" began Hale, but the other interrupted him.

"Join up, either in your own or any other name. If you're too well known in Plymouth, go to Penzance and join the lodge there. You will find plenty of men who will propose you."

"What's the idea?" asked Hale, peering down suspiciously into the man's face.

"The first idea is that you do as you're told," was the sharp answer.

BENSON

Benson gave a final and approving glance at the tea-table, filled a silver cigarette box from a carton he took from the sideboard cupboard, lit a tiny spirit lamp and drew back the velvet hangings a little farther so that the scarlet geraniums in the window-boxes could be seen with better effect. One casement window was open and a soft breeze played with the silken curtains.

Clive Lowbridge strolled in as his valet-butler was at the window.

"That will do very nicely, Benson."

He looked at his watch.

"Miss Carew is coming immediately after the matinée. You will see that the car is ready to take her home?"

"Yes, my lord." He paused by the door. "With reference to the young man Holbrook, of whom your lordship spoke: he is an American, born in Drayton, Ohio, and he was for some years on the staff of the London *Dispatch-Herald*. He is now a junior partner in Pawter's Publicity Agency, being a relative of the principal shareholder. He lives in Paddington and is unmarried. So far as I can ascertain, he has written two books which were published in Boston, but he has no other peculiarities."

"Thank you, Benson. You have settled down to your new job?"

"Yes, my lord."

"You like this a little better than working in a club?"

"Much better, my lord——" he hesitated.

"But it isn't such a good job as you thought, eh? Well, mine isn't either, Benson. I thought I should be spreading myself in Park Lane. My uncle left very little money."

"I am not surprised, my lord. The late Lord Lowbridge was known to me—I have never ventured to inform your lordship before. I used to work at his club in the West End, and I saw a whole lot of him. He spent money like water, and I've known him to lose as much as twenty thousand pounds in one night at baccarat. The Glebe Club is noted for high play. A very affable gentleman. So was his son, who died so suddenly."

"You knew my cousin too, did you?"

"Yes, my lord. Without wishing to alarm your lordship, there seems something constitutionally wrong about the family. The Honourable John died of heart failure, and you could have taken a lease of his life; Lord Lowbridge, a good-living gentleman and as hard as nails, went off in exactly the same way a year after—nobody would have dreamt that his lordship was so near to death. And both were under the care of a clever doctor—Dr. Laffin."

"You know Dr. Laffin—was he a member of the Glebe?"

"Yes, my lord."

A buzzer sounded in the hall, and he went, without unseemly hurry, to admit Betty.

"How serious you look, Clive! Has anything happened?" she asked after the greetings were over.

"No—no! Benson is a queer chap."

"Benson—your servant?"

"Yes. I find that he knew my uncle, and I guess he knew Laffin too; they were both members of the Glebe. That is where my relative dissipated the family guilders. I shouldn't be surprised if the doctor hadn't lost a con-

siderable portion of his assets under the same roof."

She sighed as she settled down to pour the tea.

"Dr. Laffin has always been poor," she said, "and yet he owns things that are worth thousands of pounds. One day I went into the study without knocking, and he had on his desk a most beautiful piece of jewellery—a great golden clasp studded with diamonds. He was very angry that I had seen it, and told me that it was only a worthless replica of the Buckle of Isis. But I'm sure it was real."

Clive bit his lip, and in his fine eyes was the shadow of trouble.

"When did you see this?" he asked.

"Over a year ago—about a fortnight after we had had the strangest adventure in Devon. Do you remember my telling you about the monks who stopped the car?"

He nodded.

"At least, I suppose they were monks," she went on. "I don't know why, but I associated the gold clasp—and it was gold, Clive, in spite of what the doctor said—with that meeting."

"On the moor?"

She nodded.

"Yes: we were very poor at the time, and the doctor was short of ready money, though he used to hint of a huge fortune which was coming to him. I'm certain he could not have had the buckle before. I think they gave it to him."

Clive Lowbridge looked at her thoughtfully.

"I don't understand him," he said. "But he was good to me as a boy, and I cannot quite share your dislike for him. For all the years of tutorial work he gave me, he did not charge a penny."

Betty could have pursued the subject, but refrained, understanding his reluctance to speak against the man she hated. And she remembered, on the way to the theatre, the circumstances that had made it necessary for Clive's mother to enlist the services of the family doctor as an unpaid tutor. She had been left a widow with a microscopic income; three lives had stood between her

boy and the title, and the prospect of his inheriting the mythical wealth of the Lowbridge estates was a remote one.

She could never associate the doctor with generosity; there must have been some *quid pro quo*.

When, that night, Betty Carew strolled on to the stage of the Orpheum, only the pilot lights were glowing in the battens, for Van Campe was an economist, and there was urgent need for economy, as she was to learn.

It was very cold and very miserable, and Betty wandered disconsolately to the little peep-hole in the curtain and stared into the deserted auditorium. There were seven people in the stalls, obviously "paper." The pit held a fringe of audience—the first two rows were hardly filled, though the doors had been open for half an hour. The young assistant stage-manager joined her.

"Looks lively, doesn't it?" he asked bitterly.

"It isn't very hopeful," she said.

"It *is* hopeful," he said. "That is all we've got left —hope! A musical comedy that hasn't any music worth whistling, and not enough comedy to raise a ha-ha from start to finish, naturally starts handicapped. The notice goes up to-night—you've seen it?"

She nodded.

The Girl from Fez had run for a fortnight. There had been seven weeks' rehearsal, and on the notice-board had appeared a typewritten slip. She had seen "the notice" before, but at the end of a long and successful run. Now this intimation that the play would be taken off in two weeks' time brought a little heartache. The last lines of the notice were even more alarming:

> "The provisional notice given to artistes on the first night will operate as stated."

"Does that include me, Mr. Tillett?" she asked.

"I'm afraid it does, Miss Carew," said the manager. "The governor knew he had a flivver before he read the criticisms in the morning papers—he dashed in and got

himself on the safe side. La Florette isn't a friend of yours, is she?"

Betty shook her head. La Florette, the thin-lipped French dancer, was not in the cast. Van Campe seldom played her, but she sat by his side at rehearsals, and in her strange French criticised and sneered and laughed derisively, and told Van Campe how much better these things were done in France; and Van Campe, who was her slave, cut and pruned, until authors were in despair, and the cast in a state of mutiny.

"Well——"

The manager opened his mouth to speak, when the pass door connecting the stage with the front of the house opened, and a fluffy figure floated through; from the crown of her waved and henna'd hair to the tips of her jewelled shoes she was a triumph of the human doll-maker's art.

She picked a dainty way through the débris of the stage, and stood before the girl, surveying her through a pair of unnecessary lorgnettes.

"Ah, you are Carew, yes? I wanted to speak to you. 'Ow do you do your 'air? It is not peroxide, no? I 'ave admire it. You are a bad actress, and your voice, *mon Dieu!* it is aw-ful, but your 'air is lovely! You 'ave puzzle me, so I promised Charles I would ask."

"And now you have kept your promise, Miss Florette," said Betty, striving to tune out the anger from her voice.

"You tell me—no?"

"There is nothing to tell you. My hair is as the Lord made it." Betty smiled in spite of her annoyance.

La Florette shrugged her thin shoulders.

"But that is what you would call—a lie, eh?

Betty's eyes snapped fire.

"It is what you would call a lie too, I think," she said, with ominous calm; "for if you are not pure unadulterated Limehouse, I have never met a lady from that district! Your broken English may sound pretty to a Dutchman or a Greek, but, unfortunately, I speak the language rather well, and I know that, beyond a smatter-

ing of Montmarte argot, you are as ignorant of French as I am of Chinese!"

"Oh, I am, am I?"

La Florette, shocked out of her pose, dropped her hands to her hips, and her shrill voice rose to a scream.

"I'll teach you to insult an artiste of my standing, you —you chorus girl! Limehouse, am I . . . ?"

The flow of expletive which followed supplied the answer to her question.

". . . and I'll have you fired out of this theatre, Miss, before you're a minute older. I've got an international reputation to keep up, I have! I don't allow no gutter-bred——"

Mr. Van Campe appeared, an agitated and rotund man, whose hands flashed gay lights as he waved them in expostulation and protest.

"Put her understudy on," he roared. "Pay her salary and throw her out!"

Betty went up to her dressing-room, hot, angry, but triumphant. She had prayed for the courage to say all that she had said to Florette. She would go to De Fell—the urbane young manager, who had offered her a part in his new production. She grew cheerful at the thought. It was at that moment that her dresser knocked.

"Dr. Laffin, Miss," she said.

Betty sighed heavily. Here was a shadow not so easily dispelled.

BETTY CONSENTS

Dr. Laffin, in the brighter light of the dressing-room, was revealed as being a little above middle height, but he was so very thin that he appeared taller. He was dressed in a funereal black; all the bitter years Betty had known him he had worn nothing else. A black, unrelieved except by the thin edge of white collar that showed above his high cravat, and the occasional appearance of a rim of white cuff at his wrists.

"Good-evening, child. Why are you not playing?" he asked.

"Because Van Campe has discharged me," she said recklessly.

To her surprise his face did not change.

"Discharged you? Well, well!" And then, remembering the opportunity which this piece of news gave to him: "I took a great deal of trouble to find this position for you. Still . . . it may be for the best. You will return home now?"

"No, I shall find other work."

Sitting down at her dressing-table, he subjected her to a long scrutiny.

"I shall not be able to make you an allowance this time," he said.

Betty did not expect that he would.

"I have a little money—" she began.

"Happily, I can save you trouble. I seem to have spent my life—saving you trouble. It would be wiser if you came home. The house in Camden Town has not been quite the same since you left. And the other matter is definitely settled."

He took from his pocket a printed leaflet, and laid it on the table before her. She braced herself for the coming struggle. Vulture! He was all that. Disaster brought him unerringly to the spot; it was as though her dismissal had been arranged by him for that night.

She read the pamphlet and looked up.

"This is an advertisement of a desk," she said innocently.

"Mortimer's Multiple Desk," he murmured. "There is no desk on the market like it. But to the outward eye, and at first glance, it appears to be no different from other desks. Suppose, however, a beautiful young lady is seen in a shop window sitting at that desk. Picture the hurrying crowd to whom shop windows are such——"

"You mean that you still have that absurd scheme—that you want me to sit in a store window . . . to exhibit myself?"

"It may sound a revolting suggestion to one who is a great actress." He mouthed the words with a certain satisfaction. "It may seem almost a desecration of her art to lower herself to the level of an exhibition. And yet, what are you but an exhibitor, Elizabeth?"

"Of course, I'll do nothing of the kind," she said. Her face was flushed, her eyes unusually bright. "I told you on Monday night—I will not do this."

"The pay is amazingly attractive." Dr. Laffin was apparently oblivious to her rising anger. "It is no less than fifteen pounds a week. Your duties begin at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and end at four o'clock in the afternoon."

"I'll not do it!"

"I fear you have no choice. I wish it. I, who took you from the workhouse, where you were supported by charity, and gave you a house, an education, and the illusion of parenthood."

"Dr. Laffin, I will do anything in reason. It isn't necessary to go over the old ground and tell you that, in spite of the material advantages you gave me, my life has been wretchedly miserable. I won't ask for your help, and I can get a part in De Fell's new play—he has half promised me."

"By the most fortunate chance I have become acquainted with a young man, who will be of the greatest assistance to you when your engagement is concluded—he is an authority on the subject of publicity——"

"Oh!"

In a flash she remembered the objectionable youth who had haunted the stage door for weeks, and, if she had any doubt at all, it was to be dispelled immediately.

"My young friend is waiting outside; I will take the liberty of bringing him in."

It was the young man; she recognised him immediately. He was not in evening dress; she would have been surprised if he wore anything so civilised. His tweed waistcoat was untidy with cigarette ash, his tie had slipped down, exposing the brass head of a stud, and his hair needed the attention of a brush.

"I think I've met you before, Miss Carew," he said briskly. "The doctor asked me to see you about this desk they're booming. I understand that your name hasn't to appear. That is good publicity wasted——"

"Mr.——?" She paused inquiringly.

"Holbrook—William. Bill to my friends."

"Mr. Holbrook, I want you to understand that I shall do nothing so humiliating as you have suggested."

"I didn't—" he began, but she signalled him to be silent.

"I have no illusions about my work," she said. "I am not a brilliant actress, and I never dreamt that I was. But I have enough respect for myself and my—my art to reject this suggestion. I have no intention of sitting in a shop window——"

"Furnished in the semblance of a handsome library," murmured the doctor.

"I don't care how it is furnished. I will not do anything so—so undignified. It would ruin whatever chance I had in this profession, and advertise my incompetence."

Mr. William Holbrook passed his fingers through his untidy hair in perplexity.

"I am rather surprised," he said. "I thought the matter was settled, Miss Carew. 'Pips' have only got the publicity end of the desk. We are the advertising agents, and this stunt is a new one on me."

She looked at him suspiciously.

"Isn't this your idea?"

"No, my love." It was the doctor. "It is not Mr. Holbrook's idea. It is mine. Will you excuse me, Mr. Holbrook?—I will see you in the morning."

When they were alone, he took up his silk hat, and smoothed the glossy nap meditatively.

"The window will be set on Tuesday," he said. "It is in a side street leading from Piccadilly. A very select neighbourhood."

"I will not do it," she said. "I am seeing Mr. De Fell on Monday, and I hope to open with his new piece."

"Open by all means," he said, "and the night you ap-

pear there will be men outside the theatre distributing handbills telling the world that you are the daughter of a man who was hanged at Oxford Prison for the murder of your mother."

The girl turned white.

"You would not dare . . . it would be cowardly, brutal . . . you would not dare!"

Dr. Laffin never smiled. When he was amused, the skin about his eyes wrinkled for a second, as it wrinkled now. With that slow deliberation, which marked his every movement, he put his hand in his breast pocket and took out a leather case.

"I have never shown you this," he said, and unfolded a newspaper cutting. "Listen!

> " 'This morning at nine o'clock, James Setherby Caren, a butler, of Nash Terrace, Bath, suffered the extreme penalty of the law at Oxford jail, to which he had been transferred after his sentence at the Bath Assizes. It will be remembered that Caren, who had been drinking heavily, shot his wife in a moment of drunken frenzy. The child, Elizabeth, who was such a pathetic figure at the trial, is now an inmate of Bath Workhouse. Caren, who expressed his penitence for his crime, walked firmly to the scaffold, and death was instantaneous. The man, who seems to have been above the average order of intelligence, enjoyed some local fame as an inventor.'

"You were rather young to remember the trial," he said, "but I dare assert that you remember how a disinterested physician rescued you from a pauper home, and gave you the advantages of an education?"

She did not answer. Young as she had been, she remembered that vividly. Remembered the pallid man in the dock, the red-robed judge, the bustle of the little court-house. She recalled a chill morning when the workhouse matron had come to her and patted her head kindly and given her an apple. There was a little gutter child in

the same dormitory, who, when the matron had gone, pointed a skinny finger at her, and shrieked:

"Her father got hung this morning!"

She did not know what "getting hung" meant at the time—she knew it was something very final, because the matron told her, to her relief, that she would never see the big, wicked man who beat her mother any more. For this she was glad, but she wanted to see her mother, and cried and cried at nights because there was no rough hand to hold hers, and no thin, weary voice to tell her fairy stories.

"I will dispel any mistaken ideas you may have as to my motive," the doctor went on. "You were an experiment: I wanted to see how impressionable was the plastic mind of childhood. As an experiment you were a failure. You have now an opportunity of repaying me for the care I have shown and the expense I have incurred on your behalf. The desk you will advertise was one of your late father's precious inventions. It is valueless."

She shuddered, in spite of herself.

"You will do as I wish?"

"If I do this, it will be the last service I will render you."

"Not the last. There is yet one more—a negative service. Now and for ever you will forget that I was ever stopped on Dartmoor one stormy night. You understand? You will forget also about a certain gold buckle you saw. If you ever speak to a living soul about that, you will speak no more!"

AT THAMES HEAD

Betty Carew might have prayed, and did pray, for deliverance from many evils, great and small. That she had failed to include a supplication for quittance of an untidy young American, who spent his work days in the office of Pawter's Intensive Publicity Agency, and his Sundays in inexpensive exploration, was brought home to

her with force on the sunny Sabbath that followed her interview with Dr. Laffin.

Betty was on one side of the Thames, Bill Holbrook on the other, and Betty was surrounded by a large wasp. Betty hated wasps, and apparently this particular wasp hated Betty, for its "z-u-u-u!" held a ferocity of purpose which was terrifying.

"Vespa vulgaris!" murmured Bill with satisfaction. "A hymenopterous insect of the family *vespidæ!"*

And then Betty gave a scream. To her, *vespa vulgar* was just plain wasp, and it had made an angry dart toward her face. She shrank back, one foot went into the water, but by an effort she recovered her balance. In another second Bill had leapt across the Thames to her side, and with one sweep of his soft hat had sent the vulgar vespa to destruction.

"Saved," he said, made a false step and went calf-deep into very cold water.

"You might have come before," she said tartly. "You saw the horrid thing attacking me."

"Not every man would leap across the Thames—that river which carries the commerce of the world upon her broad bosom——"

For this was the source of the historic river, and about them were the rolling hills of Gloucestershire.

"Anybody could jump the Thames here," she said scornfully. "A rabbit could jump it!"

"Put me down as being no better than a rabbit," he said with a quiet dignity. "And as to your ingratitude, we will overlook that. One doesn't expect it nowadays. The war has changed people's manners and cut away much of the silk linings of behaviour. May I see you home?"

"No, you may not see me home. I don't live here—as you well know," she said a little breathlessly. "I am greatly obliged to you, but I don't think you ran much risk."

"Any man who saves a popular actress from the malignant pursuit of a wasp deserves well of his country, Miss Carew," he said, and she went pink with annoyance.

"I should have recognised you, even if I hadn't met you last night," said Bill, wagging his head. "There's nobody in the world with hair like yours. Think better of it, Miss Carew. Place yourself in the hands of Pips, or, better still, in mine, and I would make you famous in a month.

She had disliked him instinctively before; she hated him now. He was so young, so horribly self-satisfied and so terribly common. Nor did his frank admiration of her hair soothe her. Betty's hair was admittedly wonderful. It had the colour and bloom of sunset corn, a red through which the gold shone so insistently that the redness did not appear until it was caught by a ray of light. And under the hair were features that could not be faulted, and a skin of delicate texture—such skins as that colour of hair so often favour.

"I think you should know that I can find my way back to the—the car without assistance," she said coldly.

"I'll come round and talk this over with you, Miss Carew," he said gravely. "Pips can give you fame. A corporation like ours that can make people look for the label on a paint can, wouldn't have much trouble in placing your name in half-watt blinders—and Pips are reasonable. So far as I am concerned, it will be a labour of love—and for fear I raise your hopes, I will add that 'love' is only used in a Pickwickian sense. What I mean is——"

But she was walking rapidly down the road to the little village where the joy wagons were parked, and her fury was only discernible by the vigour and length of her stride.

Stillwell's Select Charabanc Tours had brought her that Sunday the hundred miles which separated the head of the Thames from the City of the Eighteen Bridges—which is London. These same tours, but a different car, were also responsible for the presence of Bill Holbrook. They ran from Trafalgar Square on Sunday mornings, and for a ridiculously small sum one might be insured of a day in the country and the association of a superior company—for these were select tours. The employment

of that qualifying adjective suggested that Mr. Stillwell spent his time between tours examining the social credentials of his clients.

Unfortunately, Mr. Stillwell must have been ill during the week preceding this particular Sunday, and handed over this selective function to a careless subordinate, since the people who rode in Betty's coach were members of no exclusive social set. There were stout women who brought luncheon baskets and ate throughout the journey, riotous young men who carried refreshments in bottles, mothers of families who brought their responsibilities with them, and a vinegary spinster or two.

Happily, Mr. Holbrook was accommodated in another coach. Or he had been until the tour began its homeward journey. Then she saw him, wedged between two voluble ladies who shouted at one another across him; he was on the front seat of the wagon, and far enough removed from her to make conversation impossible.

The great, lumbering coach rolled across the dreary plain which separates Cheltenham from Oxford. Clouds had come heaping from the west; ahead the skies were a coppery grey. Somebody in the front seats began to sing a doleful song about mother. Betty shivered and drew her wrap a little closer, though the afternoon was warm to the point of discomfort. Once she saw the annoying young publicity agent glance round at her a little anxiously. He was wondering whether thunderstorms scared her—and that a storm was gathering he knew long before the first growl of thunder insisted above the noise of the coach, and the big spots came splashing down.

On the outskirts of Oxford the three coaches stopped, and, as usual, at a place of refreshment. Most of Mr. Stillwell's select company descended to fortify their nerves for the coming ordeal.

They were not alone in the caravan sense. Drawn up on the broad gravel campus before the Five Stars Inn were three huge joy wagons, but whereas Mr. Stillwell's select conveyances bore no more than his name in letters of modest size and irreproachable character, these char-

abancs wore sheets that covered the backs of each car and were lettered conspicuously:

"The Proud Sons of Ragousa.
(Pride of the medway lodge 95)
Annual Picnic."

As Stillwell's wagons came to a halt, the inn was disgorging the proud children of Ragousa, and one wagon was already filled ready for departure.

Betty, who had got down to stretch her cramped limbs, watched them, puzzled.

"Who on earth are the Proud Sons of Ragousa?" she asked, and could have bitten her tongue when she discovered that, unconsciously, she was putting the question to the objectionable young American.

"You've asked me one too many," said Bill. "I only know that it is a society of some kind. Cute little name, isn't it? Sons of Ragousa! Name seems kind of familiar. Say, Miss Carew, what's the idea of this desk stunt? I meant to ask you before, but you were so mad at me that I hadn't a chance . . ."

But Betty was already moving away. Of all the things she did not wish to do, she placed an exchange of confidence between herself and Mr. William Holbrook in the forefront.

Along the road she had seen a bush pink with dog-roses, and although dog-roses are notoriously without vitality, the plucking of them would occupy time.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the offensive young man hesitating; some remnant of decent feeling restrained him, she noted with satisfaction. Perhaps she had penetrated beneath his thick skin, or, what was more likely, he had not the gift of perseverance.

She picked her roses undisturbed, save by the swift rush of a little car that came flying past in a cloud of dust which the thunder drops had not as yet laid. Then, to her surprise, the car came to a violent halt twenty yards beyond her, and began to move backward. Though it was hardly likely that the driver wanted information

about his route, there seemed no other reason, until the machine was abreast of her, and a man leaned out of the window.

"Isn't that Betty?" he asked.

She gave a little gasp of astonishment.

"Clive!" She took the extended hand with a sense of deepest relief.

"Charabanc? Oh, Lord! Whatever made you do it? And I asked you to let me take you out! You don't want to go with that lot, do you?" he asked. "Jump in."

He opened the door for her, and she was by his side in an instant.

"I *don't!*" she said emphatically. "Providence is working for me! They are terrible!"

"I've been to Witney, to my noble house," said her companion bitterly. "You've never seen it? You're lucky! It is a horror!"

She glanced round at him, inclined to be amused, but a deep frown furrowed his smooth brow, and the good-looking face was puckered in a grimace of utter disgust.

Flick . . . flick!

A blue ribbon of lightning quivered for the fraction of a second ahead of the car, a tree by the roadside burst into white flame—she smelt burning wood as the car spun past, and instinctively nestled nearer to Clive.

"That was a beauty," he said calmly. "We'll run out of this before we reach Oxford—I think we're on the edge of the storm. You're a bad girl to go charabancing around," he said. (She thought he was trying to keep her mind off the storm, and was not far wrong.)

"I like them—the excursions, I mean. One gets into a new atmosphere and meets types. Only to-day . . . well, they were rather awful!"

Clive laughed softly.

"What about this show-girl idea of the doctor's?" he asked. "Do you intend humouring him?"

She nodded.

"You do? Moses!"

"I must—for reasons. And Clive, dear, you are to

promise me that you will not come anywhere near the wretched shop when I am installed. I'd not survive your seeing me."

"Not me. I never go shopping. Benson does all that. Were you in one of those decorated barouches—poor dear!"

"Where—oh, you mean the big wagons with their banners? No, that was an excursion party. The Sons of Ragousa—Clive!"

She uttered a little scream. Twice, three times the lightning stabbed down, so close that Betty was for the moment blinded.

She looked at her companion. His face was a shade paler, his wide-opened eyes held a something she could not read.

"Sons of Ragousa!" he said jerkily. "My God . . How funny!"

THE PROUD SONS

The Proud Sons of Ragousa were celebrating the inauguration of a new lodge, and the opening of a new lodge-room, and Bill Holbrook, standing on the edge of the sidewalk, watched with wonder and amusement the passing of a procession, which contained six brass bands and some fifty silken banners, each representative of a branch lodge except for one, heavily embroidered with bullion, and bearing the inevitable golden argosy that marked in the parade the symbol of the officers of the district lodge.

Fifty lodges were represented—Bill Holbrook counted the banners—the Pride of Kent, the Pride of Hampshire, the Pride of the Five Ports, the Pride of Limehouse . . .

It was a procession of ordinary people—artisans, factory folk, small shopkeepers, a sprinkling of office men, honest, self-conscious individuals, some wearing that hang-dog expression which comes to the Englishman when he is feeling foolish, a few beaming at the joke of

appearing in public wearing purple plush regalia, not a few immensely serious, transfigured by the unaccustomed publicity.

The spectacle was not altogether unexpected by Bill Holbrook. He knew that odd experiences have a trick of duplicating themselves. On the Sunday he had met the Ragousans in the flesh—he had been waiting all week to meet them again.

"What have they got to be proud about, anyway?" he asked.

The policeman, by whose side he stood, smiled slowly.

"Well—you've seen these societies before . . . Good Templars and Buffaloes and Sons of the Phœnix and Knights of the Round Table, haven't you? They like it. I'm a member of one myself—as a matter of fact, I'm chief noble of my lodge—Sons of the Phœnix. But these chaps aren't temperance. At the same time it's not a boozing crowd. I thought of joining myself. It's worth while. Costs a pound a year, but there's two Argosies, one in June and one in December, and they're worth fifty thousand pounds each. That's why the order has caught on."

"Fan me or I'll faint!" said Bill. "What is all this stuff about Argosies? I see now! There's a golden ship on every banner. But what do you mean by fifty thousand pounds—a quarter of a million dollars!"

The policeman looked at him suspiciously. He saw a tall, thinnish young man, rather good-looking and untidily dressed.

"You're American, aren't you? I thought you was from the bad way you talk English. About these Argosies. You pay one pound a year, and you're insured for a hundred—if you join young enough. Then every half-year there's a drawing. In June there's a first prize of ten thousand and hundreds of others—at Christmas there's a big bonus and only one prize—fifty thousand."

Bill watched the tail of the procession, with its little crowd of small boys bringing up the rear, until it passed from sight.

"That's a new one on me," he said. "I'll have to consult my police adviser."

Again the officer grinned.

"You lodge with Mr. Bullott, don't you, sir?"

"Yes." Holbrook was surprised that his fame extended to the Edgware Road.

"I've seen you go in and out; I used to be on that beat. As a matter of fact, I didn't recognise you till that bird asked me if you had rooms at the inspector's house."

Bill followed the constable's quick sidelong glance. A few feet away from them, gazing after the procession, was a man, who, in ordinary circumstances, would not have attracted his attention. Bill had a practice of dividing people he met casually into classes; one of these he called "the adequately paid," and it was in the last category that he placed the interested spectator.

He was dressed in a well-made tweed suit. He wore a spotless wide-winged collar; his cravat was black, his shoes sensible and solid. The face was thin, almost intellectual. He had a slight red moustache, and on the bridge of his bony nose rested a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles.

"What do you think he is?" asked the policeman.

"I'll guess," said Bill. "He's a floor manager."

The constable shook his head.

"Wait a minute," said Bill, "I haven't got him high enough. He's a storekeeper—one of the synthetic intelligentsia. He has socialistic tendencies, believes in the land theories of Henry George——"

"No, sir," said the policeman triumphantly.

"I'll try again," said Bill. "He's a clerk in a Government office, probably holds some good position——"

"You're wrong, sir," said the officer.

"Then what is he?"

"He's a burglar."

The policeman made the startling statement with great calm.

"That is Toby Marsh," he went on, before Bill could

recover from his shock, "one of the cleverest cracksmen in London—he's only been caught once, and that was by accident."

At that moment the spectacled eyes turned and surveyed the two men in a scrutinising, unabashed stare. In another instant he had resumed his inspection of the procession.

"I'd like to talk to him. Bring him over."

"Me?" said the officer, aghast. "Good heavens! I couldn't do that! Why, he'd tie me up in knots! Ordinary kind of police don't deal with people like that," he explained. "You see, we've got nothing on him, and the plain clothes branch doesn't thank you for interfering with that kind of feller."

At this moment, "that kind of feller" walked away from them, and disappeared in the crowd.

"Besides, you never know whether chaps like that are working for our people or not. Though I wouldn't say Toby was a 'nark'."

"Nark?" said the puzzled Bill. "Oh, you mean a stool pigeon. I get you!"

"All the same," the policeman went on, "a high-class burglar can be very useful to Scotland Yard, and if I started getting fresh with him, the chances are I'd get a rap over the knuckles to-morrow morning."

There was a time when Bill Holbrook would have followed the exclusive Mr. Marsh, and wrung from him a crisp column for the *Dispatch-Herald;* but journalism belonged to the past. Bill was now a business man, an expert on matters pertaining to publicity.

The initiative in the matter, however, was taken out of his hands. He had said good-night to the policeman, and had turned into Cambridge Terrace, when he saw Toby Marsh a little ahead of him. He was standing with his back to the railings, in the attitude of one who was waiting for somebody, and Bill would have passed him, but suddenly the man moved across the path to intercept him.

"Excuse me, sir."

His tone was that peculiar falsetto, which a certain class regard as an easy advertisement of good-breeding.

"I observed you regarding the rabble, or, as one would put it, the *hoi polloi,* and possibly you, as a newspaper reporter, are interested in the psychology of the lower orders which makes such exhibitions possible."

Bill was taken aback, both by the elegance of the diction, and the unusual nature of the man's opening.

"The lower orders," Mr. Marsh went on, evidently enjoying the sound of his own voice most thoroughly, "have the instinct of imitation. And when the instinct of imitation coincides with the desire for aggrandisement, the natural consequence is something foolish. Hence the Sons of Ragousa, with their pathetic mysteries, their grips, their password—which, by the way, is 'Drake'—their robes, their cowls, their blue fire initiations, their priors, their grand priors, captains of lodges and orders of the day."

Bill grinned.

"You seem to have a close acquaintance with the order."

"All orders are familiar to me," said Mr. Marsh, with a modest and self-deprecating gesture. "But the Twenty-Third Degree of the Sons of Ragousa more especially."

He saw the look of mystification in the other's face, and was smugly gratified.

"With the Twenty-Third Degree of the Proud Sons of Ragousa," he repeated with relish; "and more especially with the Golden Voice of the Absolute!"

For a moment Bill stared at him suspiciously. Was he drunk? Apparently Mr. Marsh read his thoughts.

"I am an abstainer, and a believer in prohibition. When I speak of the Golden Voice of the Absolute, I speak of a tangible, material being, beautiful to the eye, pleasant to the ear—her terrestrial name is Miss Elizabeth Carew!"

NO-ARREST BULLOTT

Bill gaped at him in amazement.

"Miss Elizabeth Carew? Miss Betty Carew, you mean —the actress?"

"As an actress she has never impressed me," said Mr. Marsh.

He pulled a very ornate gold case from his pocket, opened it and took out a cigarette, snapped the case and handed it for Bill's inspection.

"It cost me twenty-five pounds," he said laconically. "Every time the police pinch me, they try to find an owner for it, and after I've kept them walking about London till their feet ache, I introduce them to the jeweller from whom it was purchased. It is one of my recreations. Yes, sir, Miss Betty Carew is the lady to whom I refer."

"But, my dear, good man, what the devil are you talking about?" asked the irritated Bill. "Voice of the Absolute . . . Twenty-Third Degree . . . do you suggest that Miss Carew is a member of this amiable order?"

The man shook his head.

"I saw you talking to the 'flattie'*. I daresay he described me, and with perfect accuracy, as a burglar. To such clods as P.C. Simmonds and his kind, I am nothing more. With their lack of imagination it is almost impossible that they should see below the surface, and discover an intellect. The police have no mysteries—the introduction of the finger-print system destroyed whatever romance remained in the business of thief-catching. But when you see Bullott—a pleasant, but somewhat inexperienced officer—will you be good enough to mention to him my few remarks in regard to the Twenty-Third Degree?"

And, lifting his hat, he stalked away, leaving Bill with that baffled feeling, which came to the old-time heroes of

* London thieves *Argot* for uniformed policeman

fairy stories, who heard cows speak and fish proclaim their royal origin.

It was Bill Holbrook's fortune to be the sole boarder of a Sub-Inspector of Police, a quiet, uncommunicative man, young looking, considering his rank, and interested in the breeding of canaries.

Bill had two excellent rooms, a view of a garden, which in summer was a joyous vision, and a large share of liquid melody, which the song birds provided. That night, when he was puzzling out the strange words of his newest acquaintance, there came a tap at his door, and in response to his invitation, his landlord appeared in the doorway.

"Hullo! Come in, Mr. Bullott. Do you want me?"

"I was wondering if you'd let me have one of your papers."

There was a pile of newspapers on a shelf, and Bill pointed.

"Help yourself—they're all there. Did you wish any particular one?"

"*The Times*—I wanted to see if that agony was in again. I didn't have time at the Yard; the Deptford murder kept me busy."

Getting up, Holbrook found the newspaper.

"Which agony?" he asked. He had all the reporter's curiosity, and Bill Holbrook might label himself publicity expert and advertising genius, but he was newspaper man all through.

"Here it is."

Bullott folded the paper and pointed.

"Sylvia. I'm calling. Be ready to pung. Green Dragon."

"What the dickens does that mean?" asked Bill.

Mr. Bullot puffed his pipe vigorously.

"It is a *mah-jongg* term—the Chinese game that has caught on. Green Dragon is one of the tiles, and when a player says 'I'm calling,' it means that he only wants one piece for game. To 'pung' is to complete a three or

a pair. Two days ago the same kind of ad. appeared, only this time it said, 'East Wind. Hurry.' "

"East wind?"

"The four players at *mah-jongg* are called after the four winds. East is the chief player. It may be an advertisement for the game. On the other hand, it may be a code message between two silly young people. Thank you."

He handed the paper back, and, having acquired for the time being a habit of loquacity, seemed loth to leave. And then Bill remembered Mr. Toby Marsh.

"I suppose you've had a few queer folks through your hands at times?" asked Bill, by way of opening.

The inspector shook his head.

"I've never had a real case—never arrested a man in my life—never been in a witness-box in my life."

Sub-Inspector Bullott made the confession with the melancholy pride that a penitent confesses his sins.

Bill could only stare at him.

"You've never—oh, Lord! Why are you in the police? Wherefore the badge and insignia of your exalted rank? A *policeman!*—I don't believe you."

The inspector sighed.

"It's a fact. A perfectly terrible memory has been my ruin," he said. "They took me off my beat when I was constable before I'd ever seen a man kick a dog—why, I never so much as pinched a Percy for speeding! I was on a dull beat where nothing happened except when it rained."

"What happened then?" asked the unsuspecting Mr. Holbrook.

"It rained," said the other laconically. "It was just a good-class residential district, where they believe in hell and look forward to the annual flower show. You know the kind. The worst crime that was ever committed on my territory was wearing last year's hat to a wedding. But I'd got a trick of memorising motor-car numbers—you can learn it. I could hold in my head four hundred numbers and tell you who drove, man or woman, and how

many passengers the flivver carried. And one day the flying squad was out looking for Joe Stortling, the hold-up man, and they sent round to know if anybody had seen his car. I remembered the number, and where I had seen it. When the inspector in charge discovered my gift, they turned me out of Brockley and put me in Records. I know every habitual criminal that ever went inside. I could recognise three hundred American crooks and nearly as many French; I can read at a glance any finger-print you put in front of me, but if I was called upon to pinch a man, I'd be more embarrassed than the prisoner."

Bill was regarding him in awe.

"You poor soul!" he said in a hushed voice. "I've met the type, but in other spheres. You're the Child that Never Went to a Party! Gosh! Don't you ever want a real honest cop, Bullott?"

To the mild blue eyes of his landlord came a strange gleam.

"Don't I! And I'll never get promotion any other way. But when I ask them for a 'street,' they smile, and say: 'Things have changed since you were outside, Bullott.' They've got a notion that I sleep in the office, and have never seen a motor-car."

Bill cogitated profoundly, his eye upon the inspector's face.

"Can't you break into a case—sort of get on to it before any of the divisional police come on the spot? They wouldn't send you away. You're a Yard man."

"I suppose not," said Mr. Bullott vaguely, as he filled his pipe. "No, I guess they wouldn't. As a matter of fact, the chief—McPherson—said to me only the other day: 'Get into any good case, and you can have it—pick anything that comes up to your department for identification and grab on to it,' but, Holbrook, I haven't seen a case worth changing my slippers for."

"Oh, by the way"—Bill suddenly remembered—"do you know a man named Toby Marsh?"

"Burglar," said the other promptly; "twice charged and once convicted. Height sixty-five inches, spare build,

light blue eyes, wears glasses, two incisor teeth missing. Lives in Robbs Road—which is a well-named thoroughfare for a man of his profession—Maida Vale; uses very long words, and has a hobby for prying into other people's affairs. Yes, I know him."

"So I gather," said Bill drily. "I met him to-day. He's a mysterious kind of person."

Bullott nodded.

"Yes, that's his hobby, mystifying people. When he was caught some years ago breaking into a City office, the only thing he said to the officer who arrested him was: 'Mrs. Collitt is going to get married again; you'd better tell Collitt.' "

"And did she?" asked Bill.

"She did," said the other grimly. "Don't you remember the case, Mr. Holbrook? You were on the *Dispatch-Herald* at the time. Mrs. Collitt ran a milliner's business in Oxford Street—a youngish looking woman."

"Good Lord, yes!" gasped Bill. "Her husband disappeared, and they found him buried under the centre flower-bed in his garden. She got a lifer. Did Toby Marsh know all about that?"

"Months before it happened," said Bullott. "I remember that so well, because it was the first time I had been in a prison. I went down to Dartmoor to interview him, but he was mum as a mummy. Why, what has he been saying?"

He had been on the point of leaving. Now he closed the door which he had half opened, pulled up a chair, and, under the stimulus of interest, was galvanised into a new being.

"I couldn't tell you what he said or what he meant, except that he mentioned a lady's name, and said that she was the Golden Voice of the Absolute."

"Golden Voice of the Absolute?" repeated Mr. Bullott slowly. "In what connection?"

"He was talking about the Proud Sons of Ragousa—you've heard of them?"

"Yes, yes, I've heard of them," said the other, almost

impatiently. "They're a society which run a lottery; they have yearly and half-yearly drawings. The society was founded by a man named Leiff Stone, a crazy American who believes in theosophy and ghosts—Absolute!" He smacked his knee. "Why, of course, the Golden Voice of the Absolute would mean somebody inspired by the supreme spirit of the universe! Now, tell me that all over again."

He listened tensely, whilst Bill described the Ragousans' procession and his subsequent conversation with the burglar.

"Betty Carew—that's the actress, isn't it? Yes, I know her. But has she anything to do with the Ragousans?"

"She's never heard of them, I'll bet," said Bill, emphatically.

Bullott scratched his chin.

"Twenty-Third Degree? What the dickens is the Twenty-Third Degree? I'm going to inquire into this. I'll tell you that this man, Marsh, gets information which never comes the way of the police. I don't know how he gets it—probably while he's burgling, for he's working all the time, though we've never been able to catch him. Toby 'smashes' queer places. Ordinary jewel shops and office safes are beneath him. It's when you hear that the Headquarters of the Sunday School Union has been broken into that you begin to suspect Toby. Lawyers' offices used to be his long suit. They say he learnt enough in twelve months' work to keep him in luxury for the rest of his life if he'd been a blackmailer. But Toby never 'put the black' on anybody, as far as I've heard. He's just burglar, talkative burglar, if you like . . ." He drew a long breath. "I'd give a lot of money to know Toby's last job!" he said.

THE DESK STORE

Dr. Laffin lived in a large and gloomy house in Camden Town. It was a property he had bought when he came to London, and had furnished according to his own bizarre

tastes. In this house Betty Carew had spent most of the years of her conscious childhood. She had a dim recollection of having been brought from Bath, and of the terror that this establishment had inspired in her youthful heart. It was a very home of shadows and strange apparitions. You came upon great bronze Buddhas in unexpected alcoves; hideous masks, collected from the witch doctors of Central Africa, hung on the walls; uncouth wooden figures of ju-jus appeared in odd corners; whilst the furnishing of the doctor's own sanctum might have been the habitation of some ancient sorcerer.

On the day appointed she called at Camden Road, and found Laffin in a condition of cold rage. And standing with him in the centre of his strange room was a very interested man, notebook in hand—his attention equally divided between his queer surroundings and the narrative that the doctor was pouring out in a stream of malignant eloquence.

"If I had seen him, there would have been one burglar less in this world, Sergeant. Such men should be marked that they can be recognised. I would have them blinded as the stealers of deer were blinded in the old days; or so maimed that they carried the proof of their villainy through eternity. Let the thieving hands be shorn from the body . . . that is justice."

"Yes, yes, Doctor." The detectives of the Metropolitan Police are famous alike for their patience and politeness. "I daresay that would be an excellent idea, though the finger-print department would kick. When did you first discover your loss?"

"Last night—late," snapped Laffin. "But the notes might have been taken three nights ago—I locked them in my safe at five o'clock on that evening."

"But something besides the notes are missing?" suggested the detective.

"Yes, a gold statuette of Set, the Egyptian God, a cabalistic ring reputedly worn by Darius the Great, a silver chalice used in one of the first Eastern churches . . . but the notes are important."

"What are they about?"

Dr. Laffin's basilisk eyes seemed to burn.

"They were just notes on four sheets of paper," he said evenly, "notes for my play."

Betty smothered an exclamation. His play! Joshua Laffin, who hated the theatre and all that pertained thereto—to whom Shakespeare's only merit was that he belonged to the past!

"Little is to be gained by discussing the matter," said the doctor coldly. "The theft of those papers was a freak which shall cost this man dear."

"If there was nothing of value in 'em, I'm afraid that you may consider them as destroyed," said the detective.

His sympathy was unconvincing, thought Betty.

She stood aloof from the discussion, for, though Laffin had seen her, he took no notice of her presence. At last the detective made his escape, and then the old man condescended to favour her with his attention.

"Are you ready?" he asked harshly, and without any further preliminary put on his hat and led the way into the street.

The store had been newly furnished and reeked with the smell of drying varnish. With the exception of the big window, which had been carefully furnished, as he promised, to resemble a small study, the room behind the big window was practically empty. At the back of the shop was a smaller apartment; into this, Dr. Laffin, who had evidently been here before, conducted her. Opening the door, she found, to her surprise, that it was a dressing-room, furnished with mirror and unshaded lights, whilst over the back of a chair lay a handsome dark-green dress.

"But I can't possibly wear that," she said, aghast. "It is an evening dress."

As usual, Dr. Laffin made no reply.

"You'll find a string of pearls on the dressing-table. Be careful with them; they are real," he said, in his precise way. "There is another matter on which I have already instructed you, Elizabeth; you will find on the

desk in the shop window a small jade vase, with one red rose. No more than one red rose must ever appear in that vase, which must always be on your desk. Do you understand? It—must—always—be—on—your—desk."

The position or permanence of the rose did not for the moment interest her.

"But I cannot wear this dress," she said, determinedly.

He picked up the gown, looked at it disparagingly.

"We will get you another," he said.

And then, as he was going out of the room, she stood before the door and blocked the way.

"I am going to know what this all means," she said; "why you are so insistent upon my taking this position, why this store is new, and why I am to appear in a shop window for the amusement of a Cockney crowd. There is something in this which you have not told me."

"There is a fortune in it; I think I have told you that," he said. "Further, I can make no statement. It is my whim, perhaps——"

"Then it *is* your store?" She took the point instantly.

"And if it is?" he asked, his black eyebrows rising.

"If it is, it is not your money," she said quietly. "You are almost penniless. Tradesmen who know my association with you have been to see me at the theatre. There are sheriffs' writs against you; one of the tradespeople told me this."

"Who has been talking about me?" he asked sharply, forgetting for the moment his precision of speech. "I demand his name! I will punish him . . ."

"Why pretend?" she asked bitterly. "You forget that I have been through this before, Dr. Laffin. You haven't forgotten one week when we were almost starving, because you had come back from Monte Carlo with every penny of your credit pledged?"

"You know a great deal too much, my friend," he said.

He went out, and returned with a weedy little man, whom he introduced as the manager of the store.

"You'll take no orders from him," he said, in that gentleman's presence. "You're practically your own mis-

tress. You will come on duty at eleven and go off at four o'clock in the afternoon. If the crowd stares at you, there is no occasion for you to stare back. I will see that nobody speaks to you when you leave the store at night, and a car will be waiting for you to take you home."

The first hour of her ordeal was an agony. She had been given account books, paper, and began to write aimless letters to nobody in particular, trying to forget the existence of the crowd which was gathering, and which, from time to time, was moved on by a policeman.

She tried hard to concentrate her mind upon some tremendous matter; to make up stories, pleasant and unpleasant, which would grip her attention and make her forget the grinning faces that stared through the glass. About Dr. Laffin and his burglary. Who had been the unlucky thief, she wondered, or tried to wonder. It was no use. Try as she did, most desperately hard, she could not bring her thoughts from her humiliation. It pleased Mr. William Holbrook that morning to make a visit of inspection.

The store that had been taken for the New Desk Company had a thirty foot frontage on one of the most expensive thoroughfares in the West End of London. Yet, though it was expensive, it was not, from a shopper's point of view, the most desirable site. The headquarters of those corporations and houses which would be most likely to patronise this brand-new establishment were very remote from Duke Street; and as he came abreast of the house agent's office, Holbrook remembered that he had a friend at court in this establishment, and went in.

The junior partner, a man of his own age, expressed all the surprise that Holbrook had felt.

"Why they've hired that shop front, heaven only knows," he said. "As a matter of fact, we rented it to them, and I told them at the time that it wasn't the best position for a concern of that kind, but they insisted."

"For how long have they taken the store?" asked the interested Holbrook. "And who are 'they'?"

" 'They' is Dr. Laffin," replied the agent, "and he has

taken the place for three months certain, and the right to renew for a further period. The store, as you may guess, was already let when they applied, and Laffin is merely the sub-tenant. The real occupiers are not moving to Duke Street until the beginning of next year, so that they were quite glad to rent it to these crazy people. By the way, I'm not so sure that they are as crazy as we think; they've got a most amazing display in the window—probably you saw the crowd on the sidewalk?"

"I saw the crowd," said Bill, "and guessed the reason. A lady is working in the store window?"

"They say she is a very well-known actress," he said. "I went down and had a peep at her, and whether she can act, or whether she's merely a musical comedy artiste, she is most decidedly a beauty."

Bill Holbrook grunted. Betty Carew's beauty did not interest him as much as the novelty of her position, and the peculiarly unsatisfactory nature of his own—in so far as he represented Pips.

A few minutes later he stood on the outskirts of the crowd and looked into the shop front. In the centre of the "room," at a small and very ordinary-looking writing-table, sat Betty Carew, and it was not necessary for him to make personal inquiries to see that she was intensely distressed under the stares of a London crowd.

To Betty every moment of that day had been an agony; the clock scarcely seemed to move. She felt as if she could die of shame, and once she half rose, determining to run away, anywhere, rather than submit for another moment to the humiliation which had been put upon her. Her one fear was that Clive Lowbridge should see her, and she found her only (and dismal) amusement in the thought of what he would do when he made the discovery.

"Miss Carew!"

She looked round. The sham door of the study was ajar, and she saw the concerned face of William Holbrook. It needed but this last trial to turn her misery to madness.

"Lay off, won't you?" he begged. "I want to talk to you."

"Please go away." Her voice vibrated with anger. "How dare you come and gloat over your wretched work!"

Bill glared at her in amazement.

"Woman, you're mad!" he said. "Me—or I, as the case may be? Come out!"

His voice was authoritative, his gesture almost imperious. Without knowing exactly why, she obeyed him.

"Now, what's this stuff about this being my idea?" he demanded.

"Dr. Laffin said so."

"Dr. Laffin is a lying crow," said Bill calmly. "He's a prevaricating ghoul! He called us in to run the stunt, and then did it himself. The only thing we've got to do is to send out a par to the papers—he even wrote that."

"What is the paragraph?" she asked quickly. "About me—oh no, not about me?"

Bill fished out a dozen envelopes from his pocket, and tore open one.

"It doesn't mention your name," he said, unfolding the contents. "Listen:

"THE RED-HAIRED GIRL.

"Passers-by in Duke Street are afforded an unusual spectacle. A window of one of the stores in the thoroughfare has been fitted up like a study, and at a table-desk sits an extraordinarily pretty girl with hair of a most amazing red. On the desk at which she sits is a green jade vase containing one red rose. The lady is apparently advertising the desk at which she writes, but the effect is a singularly striking one."

"And what good that is, except to bring a crowd, I don't know. Not a word about the desk. I think that doctor is—" he tapped his forehead.

"Must this go in?" she asked, with a sinking heart.

"I hope so," said Bill, "but the 'must' is a matter for

a number of city editors of divers temperamentalities. Excuse me talking like a burglar."

She thought that this was some catch phrase, but he went on:

"Met a regular burglar professor the other day—he talked like Roget's *Thesaurus* of English Words and Phrases . . ."

She hoped that this hateful young man, at any rate, would go on talking. Every second was a second's respite from the dreadful ordeal of the window.

"Half of 'em won't take the par because there's a business end to it. Nowadays, the only way you can get free publicity about almost anything is to kill somebody with it. But I'm going to tell—good-morning, Doctor."

It was Laffin, who had strode through the door, and his lips were quivering with fury.

"Why aren't you at your post?" he asked, quietly enough.

"Because I asked Miss Carew to come out—that's why," said Bill coolly. "See here, Doctor, you've got me guessing. What—is—the—grand—idea?"

"Your business—" began Laffin.

"Don't do it, doc," implored Bill. "I know what my business is, and I'm attending to it; but there's something behind this window show that isn't straight publicity."

He prodded the old man's waistcoat with an inkstained finger.

"If I wasn't publicity, Laffin, and I was just a low-down reporter, like I am at heart, I'd be down at Central Office at this very minute, saying 'Captain, I've got a good story—but it's too good for newspapers; send a sleuth, or inspector, or whatever you call your high-class cops down to question old man Laffin, and maybe he won't come back alone.' "

Slowly the colour was leaving Joshua Laffin's cheeks; from yellow to grey, from grey to dirty white. By the time Bill had finished, the old man's lips were colourless.

An hour later, Bill Holbrook walked unannounced into the office of Mr. Pawter.

"Lay off, won't you?" he begged. "I want to talk to you."

"Please go away." Her voice vibrated with anger. "How dare you come and gloat over your wretched work!"

Bill glared at her in amazement.

"Woman, you're mad!" he said. "Me—or I, as the case may be? Come out!"

His voice was authoritative, his gesture almost imperious. Without knowing exactly why, she obeyed him.

"Now, what's this stuff about this being my idea?" he demanded.

"Dr. Laffin said so."

"Dr. Laffin is a lying crow," said Bill calmly. "He's a prevaricating ghoul! He called us in to run the stunt, and then did it himself. The only thing we've got to do is to send out a par to the papers—he even wrote that."

"What is the paragraph?" she asked quickly. "About me—oh no, not about me?"

Bill fished out a dozen envelopes from his pocket, and tore open one.

"It doesn't mention your name," he said, unfolding the contents. "Listen:

"THE RED-HAIRED GIRL.

"Passers-by in Duke Street are afforded an unusual spectacle. A window of one of the stores in the thoroughfare has been fitted up like a study, and at a table-desk sits an extraordinarily pretty girl with hair of a most amazing red. On the desk at which she sits is a green jade vase containing one red rose. The lady is apparently advertising the desk at which she writes, but the effect is a singularly striking one."

"And what good that is, except to bring a crowd, I don't know. Not a word about the desk. I think that doctor is—" he tapped his forehead.

"Must this go in?" she asked, with a sinking heart.

"I hope so," said Bill, "but the 'must' is a matter for

a number of city editors of divers temperamentalities. Excuse me talking like a burglar."

She thought that this was some catch phrase, but he went on:

"Met a regular burglar professor the other day—he talked like Roget's *Thesaurus* of English Words and Phrases . . ."

She hoped that this hateful young man, at any rate, would go on talking. Every second was a second's respite from the dreadful ordeal of the window.

"Half of 'em won't take the par because there's a business end to it. Nowadays, the only way you can get free publicity about almost anything is to kill somebody with it. But I'm going to tell—good-morning, Doctor."

It was Laffin, who had strode through the door, and his lips were quivering with fury.

"Why aren't you at your post?" he asked, quietly enough.

"Because I asked Miss Carew to come out—that's why," said Bill coolly. "See here, Doctor, you've got me guessing. What—is—the—grand—idea?"

"Your business—" began Laffin.

"Don't do it, doc," implored Bill. "I know what my business is, and I'm attending to it; but there's something behind this window show that isn't straight publicity."

He prodded the old man's waistcoat with an inkstained finger.

"If I wasn't publicity, Laffin, and I was just a low-down reporter, like I am at heart, I'd be down at Central Office at this very minute, saying 'Captain, I've got a good story—but it's too good for newspapers; send a sleuth, or inspector, or whatever you call your high-class cops down to question old man Laffin, and maybe he won't come back alone.' "

Slowly the colour was leaving Joshua Laffin's cheeks; from yellow to grey, from grey to dirty white. By the time Bill had finished, the old man's lips were colourless.

An hour later, Bill Holbrook walked unannounced into the office of Mr. Pawter.

"Your wish has come true, Uncle Pips," he said.

"Are you resigning?" asked Mr. Pawter, hopefully.

Bill nodded.

"I've signed on with the *Dispatch-Herald*. I'm crime reporter, and you'll be wise not to start anything, for you're practically at my mercy; if it wasn't a crime for a bald head to market Gro-Kwik Rejuvenates Tired Follicles, I don't know what was."

Mr. Pawter lay back in his chair, aghast.

"Are you serious? Don't be a fool—I'm not referring to your cheap jest about one of the best hair preparations ever put into the hands of the public—but about this crime reporting. Why? You're getting a good salary . . ."

"Little, but good," corrected Bill. "No, salary doesn't matter. Pips, I'm on the trail of the biggest story I've ever smelt. And, Pips, I'm going to do a good turn to the only policeman that has ever stepped to the witness stand and perjured himself in a good cause."

Mr. Pawter glanced up at the clock.

"The saloons do not open until twelve," he said offensively. "You've been drinking out of hours!"

"No, I'm not drunk, if that is what you mean," said Bill without resentment. "I'm talking about a real policeman, though I admit that there is something very unreal about him. I've seen Lowther of the *Dispatch-Herald*, and he's agreed to give me the job."

Mr. Pawter leant back with an air of patient resignation.

"There are such things as contracts," he said gently, "such words as obligations, which probably do not appear in your bright lexicon. You are perfectly serious?"

Bill nodded.

"Then there is nothing more to be said. It is such a novel experience to find you serious about anything that I am enjoying an unusual sensation. I shall miss you,

in the same sense that a flagellant misses a whip that is mislaid. You're a queer, unscrupulous lad, and I like you for it. You keep me from being respectable."

"Let us skip the badinage and come to cases," said Bill. "You owe me a month's salary."

Mr. Pawter sighed, took a cheque-book from his drawer, and wrote laboriously.

"Your job is open when you like to come back to it," he said casually, "though the thought of the way you handle this business keeps me awake at night. What is the game, William—seriously?"

"I'll tell you," said Bill, and sat down.

For a quarter of an hour Mr. Pawter listened to a series of suspicions, and, when his assistant had finished:

"Very sensational," he said, disparagingly. "It's queer how the merest hint of crime arouses your imagination, which, in the operations of this business is so conspicuously dormant. By the way, did you see Mr. Stone?"

"Yes, I've got another interview with him to-day. I like his majesty rather much. He's a good, straight, honest citizen, deficient in only one respect—he seemed to think there was something in your advertising proposition."

"Naturally," murmured Mr. Pawter. "Fix that before you leave us, William, and, for the first time since you have been working with me, I shall feel that your salary hasn't been wrung from the firm by a confidence trick."

Mr. Stone was not living at an hotel; he had taken a furnished flat in Albemarle Street for the season, and it was there that Bill had found him on the Monday morning. He was a tall, slight man, with the face of one who lived in the open. His hair was almost white; the thin face heavily lined; but there was a sparkle of humour which Bill had noticed was almost inseparable from the eyes of those giants of industry, who are sometimes labelled "captains," and more often "kings."

His English valet admitted the visitor, and took him straight into the drawing-room, which had been converted into something which was half office and half lounge.

"Come along in, Mr. Holbrook," said Stone. "You're staying to lunch?"

"Yes."

"I have invited my brother, but I very much doubt if he'll come." He laughed softly. "You're a newspaper man, aren't you? Or you were before you took up advertising?" and, when Bill nodded: "I was certain of that. One can't mistake men of your profession; there is something about them that is characteristic. English or American, they're all the same. But you're an American?"

"I have that distinction," said Bill. "Yes, Mr. Stone, I was a newspaper man, and, what is more, I am a newspaper man again. In fact, you're the last client of Pawter's I shall see for a very long time."

"Going back, eh?" The keen-eyed man nodded. "You fellows can never keep away from ink. I suppose you're just aching for somebody to discover a body in the river?"

He went on abruptly to the business in hand.

"This proposition of Pawter's appeals to me. There has never been a selling campaign for lumber in this country, and yet you're using it all the time. Most of it comes from Norway and Scandinavia. I don't see why we shouldn't have a bigger share of the market."

He talked wood for the best part of an hour, kept his listener working on his amendment to Pawter's scheme, and as suddenly as he began, he stopped and looked at his watch.

"That fellow won't be here," he said. "It is ten minutes after one, and though he has many drawbacks, he has one virtue—punctuality."

"Does your brother live here?"

"Yes, he lives here," he said shortly. "I haven't seen him in ten years, though I hear from him occasionally."

"You have been in London before, Mr. Stone?" asked Bill, as he unfolded his serviette.

"Yes, I know the country rather well, though I haven't been here since—well, since the last time I met my brother, and then I was only in England from Wednesday to Saturday."

"Do you like London?"

"No," was the immediate answer. "That is hardly a fair thing to say, because as a capital I like it immensely. It is a city of comfort and kindness; although the English people are a little thick-headed and a little priggish, behind all the disagreeable facets of their nature there is a large charity and a courtesy beyond the understanding of most folks who have only a superficial acquaintance with them. Leiff would be an Englishman—I am talking about my brother—if he were anything!" He smiled faintly. "There you have an instance of a genius on the wrong track. As a newspaper man you must have met them a score of times in the criminal courts—oh no, Leiff isn't a criminal! He has great gifts, but he uses them queerly. His life is rather like one of those rivers that run into the desert and are swallowed up in the unproductive sand. He would have made a good churchman; equally he would have been a great historian. He has just that touch of romantic mediævalism, which produces fascinating and inaccurate histories!"

He stared out of the window absently, and bit his lip.

"Yes, I know England," he said, speaking half to himself. "I sometimes wish I'd never seen the country, never put my foot upon its shores, and sometimes I'm on my knees in gratitude that fate led me to this land."

He caught Bill's fascinated eyes and laughed.

"You would like Leiff—he is one of those charming idealists that newspaper men find so refreshing and so rare. If he has any mean qualities, it is that touch of the theatrical, which you see in the Sons of Ragousa——"

"The Sons of Ragousa!" gasped Bill. "What has your brother to do with that?"

"He founded the order," said Mr. Stone, his eyes twinkling at the effect he had produced upon his guest. "Fifteen to twenty years ago Leiff had his great uplift scheme, and laid down the plans for his society. I tell you, that man is a natural born organiser. In a business man's office he wouldn't be worth two cents a month. But give him something bizarre, something fantastical, something

that gives him an opportunity of introducing the atmosphere of the middle ages, and Leiff will work twenty-three hours out of the twenty-four, and spend the other hour thinking. He tried to start a branch of the society on the other side, but it didn't work. Maybe our people aren't gamblers, for a gamble is at the bottom of the Ragousans' popularity. That annual, or semi-annual, bonus of his was the inspiration of a genius. It got people interested in his society who never would have dreamt of joining. He brought in every class from the highest to the lowest, and, incidentally, got round the anti-gambling laws of England so effectively that your Government——"

"Not my Government," protested Bill.

"Well, the Government of England have never been able to take action against him. Nobody knows how the fortunate recipients of the argosies are chosen. If there is a lottery, nobody has seen the lottery drawn, and no announcement has ever been made that it has been drawn. Twice a year some lucky people receive a bald intimation that their number has received a huge prize. The process of selection is not known, and by the rules of the Proud Sons of Ragousa (I'm not so sure it isn't part of their oath) the method of choice is not even discussed. There is no doubt about the *bona fides* of the members who have benefited. But how or why the luck should come to them is not explained."

Again he was looking out of the window, deep in thought.

"A membership of four hundred thousand," he said, and his lips clicked impatiently. "What a selling organisation!"

After that the talk turned to home politics, to the depredations of the cotton boll, and to other matters of peculiar interest to a Southerner.

Bill Holbrook went back to his office, delivered the fruits of his discussion (with a great deal of self-commendation, coldly received) and hurried back to his lodgings to square up some work that he had taken home to finish. He had forgotten his key, and when he

knocked the door was opened by Inspector Bullott, and on the police officer's face was an expression which Bill had never seen before.

"Hullo!" he said in surprise. "You're home early?"

"I've left the office for good, I hope," said Bullott solemnly. "The chief has given me a roving commission, and I'm not going back to that darned bureau until I can wear a police uniform without blushing."

Bill held out his hand.

"Brother," he said, "a new life has dawned for both of us. Bring up a bottle of beer, and let's talk murder!"

THE MAN FROM NOWHERE

It was the third day of Betty Carew's ordeal, and she groaned as she turned into Duke Street, and saw the little knot of curious sightseers waiting before the store window with its drawn blinds. That morning, almost every newspaper had published the "red-haired girl" paragraph, with or without variations. The previous afternoon, a string of reporters had arrived, and she had dreaded to look at the morning newspapers. For the worst had happened; she was identified. One newspaper had made a column story headed:

"ACTRESS FINDS MORE LUCRATIVE OCCUPATION THAN STAGE LIFE.

"Distress among mummers induces Miss Carew to take show-girl's job in desk store."

Another journal carried a three-column photograph of her at work. Mercifully her back was turned, and the intervention of a plate-glass window had made recognition impossible. She found one result of the publicity; when she arrived there were three letters, all delivered by hand, from theatrical managers, offering her engagements. One undertook to produce a sketch for the road

entitled "The Girl in the Window," with herself as the central figure. She tore up the letters in disgust, and, bracing herself, stepped into the window and turned her back to the crowd.

She could not go on; this thing was unenjoyable. Pulling open one of the drawers of the desk (the difficulty she had in opening it was no kind of advertisement for the merits of this marvellous piece of furniture) she took out a letter. It was the "message" that was to be delivered to the unknown caller. What would happen when he came? Would her trial be at an end? She had asked Laffin the night before, when he had come for her, but he had made no reply.

It was towards noon, when, out of the tail of her eye, she saw a car come slowly up the street and stop just short of the crowd. This was not unusual, for curiosity was not confined to the masses. She was conscious that somebody was pushing a way through the crowd, but did not turn her head, until somebody rapped at the window gently with the head of an umbrella, and, turning, her face went crimson. She was looking into the eyes of La Florette, and the smile on the dancer's face was maddening. Quickly she brought her attention back to the desk, trying to forget the woman, malignantly triumphant. And then the door of the shop opened, and there came to her the faint fragrance of La Florette's favourite perfume.

"How very sweet!"

The little door of the window front had been opened. La Florette, bubbling with malicious laughter, was watching her.

Betty sprang up from her chair, and in two strides had crossed the window floor and slammed the door behind her.

"Do you want to buy a desk?" she asked, her flaming eyes fixed on the woman.

La Florette shrugged her thin shoulders.

"My dear, what should I do with a desk?" she asked sweetly.

"That occurred to me, but even the illiterate must have some place to scrawl," said Betty.

Under the rouged cheeks the colour came and went.

"You insolent little beast!" she spat. "You—you shop-girl!"

"I can't tell you what you are," said Betty calmly, "because the only words I could use are forbidden in decent society. Do you want to buy a desk?" she asked again. "If you do not, there's the door!"

"I shall report you to your employers—" began La Florette.

"I'd almost forgive you if you would," said Betty, so earnestly that the woman stared. "Have you any business here at all? Because, if you haven't, go with the crowd, where you belong, Miss Florette, or Simkins or Snoopper, or whatever your real name may be. All Limehouse is outside; you can see the marks of their unpleasant fingers on the glass. One more or less doesn't matter to me."

It was a long time before La Florette could articulate.

"You're in your proper place now, Carew," she said shrilly, "where *you* belong—a show-girl—an exhibition, a common advertising woman." She choked with rage. "I'm going outside," she went on, "I'm going to stand and tell people who you are, and what a rotten actress you were. Even the newspapers say that you were such a bad actress that you had to take this job!"

Suddenly Betty jerked open the door, caught the woman by the arm with a grip that surprised the pseudo-French dancer, and thrust her into the street, slamming the door behind her. And then, with no fear, no apprehension, no qualms, Betty Carew stepped back into the window and smiled down into the distorted face of this exotic, rooted in the slums, and drawing her sustenance from the refuse of a Dutch ghetto.

For fully a second they looked at one another, and then La Florette darted into the crowd, pursued by the cheers of the quick-witted gamins who had noted her hasty exit and had divined the cause.

The second of the visitors, less welcome, came while

she was eating a hasty luncheon in the deserted showroom. She heard the quick step and looked up into the troubled eyes of the best-looking man in London.

"Why, Clive," she faltered, "I thought you promised me you would not come?"

"I had to come. Did you see the papers this morning?" he asked savagely, and, without waiting for her to reply: "This is monstrous, Betty! I'm not going to allow it! I'll see that old scoundrel to-day——"

She shook her head.

"It's perfectly useless seeing 'the old scoundrel'!" she said, with a little smile. "Clive, I've got to go through with it."

He was stalking up and down the room, his hands tragically clasped behind him, a frown upon his face.

"Have you seen anything of that brute from Pawter's?"

"Holbrook?" Again her lips twitched. "I'm beginning to think he's not such a brute as I believed," she said, and told him of the little scene that had occurred between Joshua Laffin and the man from Pawter's. "I am sure he was speaking the truth when he said that he had no responsibility for this freak of Dr. Laffin's."

"He was responsible for the paragraphs in the newspapers," growled Lord Lowbridge.

"He told me about them, and I believe that, if I had insisted, he would not have circulated the story," she said. "Clive, have you the slightest idea why the doctor is doing this? I think I could bear the indignity if I were performing some useful service, but we haven't had so much as an inquiry about the desk," she said ruefully.

His moody eyes were surveying her.

"How long are you allowed for lunch?"

"Just as long as it takes to eat. The doctor says I mustn't be out of the window for more than ten minutes at a time, and that means that by the time my engagement is through I shall have a red nose from indigestion!"

"I suppose you'd better stick it," he said, after a

while, "though I just hate the thought of your being turned into a puppet show. Has anybody come for the precious message?"

"No, and I don't think they will. I sometimes think that the doctor is mad—for the past year he has become obsessed with his theosophical ideas. He was always a difficult man to live with, delighting in horrors and gloom, but since he has taken up his study of the unknown he has become simply awful. I'm afraid I must go now, Clive," she said, rising. "You won't stay and stare at me, will you? No, of course you won't!" She squeezed his arm affectionately. "Now go. I want you to be well out of sight before I assume my great rôle of Diana at the Desk!"

She could treat the matter flippantly in his presence, but when he had gone there came a return of her despair.

She had put her watch on the desk, and there were times when she thought that it had stopped, the hands moved so slowly. Two o'clock came, and three. She kept her thoughts upon La Florette, the most occupying subject of any. What a day of joy for the dancer, despite her unceremonious exit from the scene! Betty did not doubt that the woman would collect every friend, every acquaintance that she had, and bring them to swell the curious throng before the window. And in this she was not far wrong, for at that very moment La Florette was telephoning to Van Campe, busy with the final rehearsal of the *Girl from Morocco,* which he was sending on the road.

"I want every principal and every chorus boy and girl to go round and take a look at Carew," she said. "I don't care what you're doing; they've got to break off some time. Give them an extra half-hour——"

But before the first of the theatrical contingent arrived, the crisis had occurred.

It was nearing four o'clock, the hour at which she left her post, and the manager had sent her in a cup of tea. She had almost become hardened, she thought, as she sipped the hot, refreshing liquid, to the entertainment of

her audience. Drinking tea was easier than doing nothing.

She put the cup away, and had gone back to her aimless scrawlings, when, looking round, she saw that for the moment attention had been diverted from her to the newest and strangest of spectators.

He was a gaunt man of middle height; his white face would have attracted notice, even had he not chosen to appear in a black cassock buttoned from neck to feet. His head was bare, and his hair hung over his collar, a cascade of iron-grey. Leaning on a long staff almost his own height, he was gazing, spell-bound, and it seemed to Betty that he was taking in every detail of her face, her dress, her hair, the simple ornamentation of the desk.

So startled was she by this unexpected apparition that she half-turned to face the street, and met his gaze full. Slowly he moved toward the door, and, looking down, she saw that his feet were bare, protected only from the road by thin sandals that were strapped across the instep and fastened with a leather thong about the ankle. The door opened, and, with a thumping heart, Betty realised that the crucial moment was at hand—that it was the man who Dr. Laffin had promised would call, the man to whom the message was to be delivered.

With trembling fingers she took the envelope from the drawer, and, without waiting, stepped out of the window in time to confront him. He stared at her in silence.

"Do you want me?" she asked breathlessly.

Twice the heavy eyelids blinked.

"O wondrous day for me!" he said in a hushed tone. "Speak Golden Voice of the Absolute, speak and tell me the hour of my death!"

THE MESSAGE

BETTY was mute. A cold sensation ran down her spine; her knees trembled beneath her. Again the old man spoke.

"O Golden Voice of Supreme Justice, what word have you from the planes beyond?"

She could only thrust forward the letter. It was unaddressed. In the top left-hand corner was a queer sign which had excited her curiosity before, and which was now to have an extraordinary effect upon her strange visitor. No sooner did his eyes fall upon the scrawl than he fell on his knees, and, stooping, kissed the hem of her dress.

"I have your leave to go, O Long Desired?"

She nodded, and, incapable of speech, stood, frozen to the spot, long after the door had closed behind him.

Within ten minutes of his departure the door was flung open, and Dr. Laffin came in. He was pale, unusually excited, betraying an agitation which was foreign to him.

"Well, girl, what happened?" he asked, the affectation eliminated from his voice.

"I don't know," she said, dully. "What does it mean . . . that man in the strange dress, with the long white hair . . . he kissed my dress. Oh, doctor, what does it mean?"

"You gave him the letter? You're sure—you gave him the message?"

Laffin's eagerness was like nothing she had ever seen in him.

"Change and come home," he said, speaking rapidly.

"Doctor, I can't come here any more," she said, desperately. "I don't care what you do, I can't come!"

To her amazement, he nodded.

"No, I do not want you to come again. Your work is not finished, but it does not lie here."

He turned to the little manager, and paralysed him with his next announcement.

"Close this store to-morrow morning; get everything cleared out. I engaged you for a month, and I'll give you a month's salary."

"But what about selling the desks?" stammered the little man.

Dr. Laffin did not vouchsafe an answer.

The crowd had dispersed with the drawing of the window shades, and there was no person in Duke Street curious enough to glance at her when she came out with the doctor.

"I'll go home on top of a 'bus, Doctor," she said. "I have a headache, and I——"

"You're coming home with me, my friend," said Laffin, who had regained his old imperturbability. "I have something to say to you."

"But I promised I would go to tea with Clive——"

"You're coming home with me. Clive can wait—if by Clive you mean that impecunious young man, Lord Lowbridge."

She could not make a scene in the street, and nothing was to be gained by further argument. She preceded him into the car, resolved to make the forthcoming interview short.

The car drew up before the house in Camden Road; the doctor jumped out and offered his hand to her; and at that moment came a horrible sense of danger, a premonition of peril beyond her understanding.

"I don't think I'll go in with you, Doctor," she said. "Can't you get the chauffeur to drive us round the park and say what you have to say then? I must be home before dinner . . ."

"You will come inside for a few moments . . . no longer. I promise you I will not keep you more than five minutes."

Fear of making a scene induced her to yield. Without a glance to left or right, she followed him through the badly fitting gate, and did not so much as notice that there had been one interested spectator. Mr. William Holbrook had both seen and heard.

THE LOCKED ROOM

THE doctor opened the door of his study, and again she hesitated. There was no reason in the world why she should fear him any more at that moment than she had in the past; but somehow the very atmosphere of this house was fearful.

"You will not return to the shop, Elizabeth," were his first words, "and I do not doubt that you will be very pleased to know this."

He motioned her to a chair, and with a lifetime's habit of obedience, she sat down.

"You will remember that a year ago, as a result of the desire expressed by you for the privacy which, in this age of prurience and hypocrisy, every woman regards as her due, I went to the great expense of creating what was virtually a house within a house, a dwelling-place in but not of my own home."

In such magniloquent language did the doctor describe the very simple process of fixing a door to the top landing of the house, which gave her the floor to herself. The cost had been infinitesimal, and Laffin had disputed every item of the carpenters' bill. The "dwelling-place" she had thus acquired, had been a bedroom, a bathroom, which had been intended for the servants, two other rooms, one of which was empty, and one containing sufficient furniture to emphasise its bareness.

"Your suite is as you left it. I have been at some pains to collect for you the linen necessary to your comfort; there is a gas fire and a gas ring, at which you may cook——"

"I don't understand you, Doctor. You know that I am not returning to the house," she interrupted. "I am very comfortable in my own little apartments. I thought we had settled that matter definitely?"

As usual, Laffin made no direct response.

"Before you reject an offer conceived in the very spirit of charity, before you strike at the hand which has fed

you and clothed you, which has rescued you from the ignominy of a pauper school and the humiliation of domestic service, child of infamous parentage, be so good as to inspect my work of devotion and kindness, and tell me if I have fallen short in my duty to one in whose veins runs the foul blood of a besotted murderer."

"Oblige me by leading the way," he said, with over-elaborate courtesy, and, with a shrug of her shoulders, she went before him up the stairs, determined that nothing he could say would induce her to remain a minute longer in that house than was absolutely necessary.

Her "suite," as he was pleased to call it, was on the third floor. The door at the top of the landing was locked, and, in addition, she saw a staple and bolt which seemed to have been newly fixed.

"Do you padlock this door?" she asked.

"If you do not return, it shall be padlocked and never opened again."

"I hope you will also throw away the key," she said coolly, "for these are the most dismal rooms in the house."

There was little change in her apartment; the bed had been made up, a fire was laid in the grate, and two or three books were on the table, but——

"When did you have these bars put up?" She pointed to four steel rods that barred the window.

"Quite recently," he said.

Bedroom and bathroom were at the back of the house, overlooking a parallelogram of disorderly gardens. She walked out of the room, intending to go into what had been planned as her sitting-room, but the door was locked.

"It is not my intention that you should use the rooms at the front of the house," said Dr. Laffin.

"It is not my intention to use any," she answered.

To this he gave no reply, and she was so inured to his bad manners that she did not realise that he had passed through the landing-door until she heard it slam, and the snap of the lock as it turned.

"Let me out!" Her fists were hammering on the panel.

"You will stay until I am ready for you, my little friend."

His voice was muffled, and only now she realised the thickness of the door. He was fitting a padlock on the new bolt; she heard the grating of iron against iron, and then two bolts were shot.

The first wave of her anger passed, leaving her deadly cool. The little warning which her unconscious self had whispered, was something more than an unreasonable fear; there was another and a more sinister explanation for Joshua Laffin's conduct.

The door was impossible. She went into the bedroom, opened the window and tried to look out. The steel rods were an effective barrier to escape, even were it possible to scale the sheer wall that dropped fifty feet to a stone-flagged courtyard.

And then a wild hope surged in her heart, and she sprang up from the bed on which she was sitting, and ran to the landing door. She had heard a familiar voice below. It was Clive Lowbridge!

"Clive, Clive!" she called, and hammered with all her might on the door. "Clive, help me!"

She listened; there came the thud of a door, and a dead silence reigned.

To give way to hysterical fear now would be madness, she thought, and strove to calm herself. It was not long before she had her reminder that she had not eaten since her frugal luncheon, and she went into the little kitchenette, where she had so often cooked surreptitious meals in the old days, when her sole source of heat supply was one gas burner. At the sight of the provisions on the table she grew thoughtful. Dr. Laffin had made such preparations that she could not doubt he expected her imprisonment to be a long one.

She finished her dinner, washed the plates and strolled back to her room to sit down and think . . .

As the church bells clanged the tenth hour, Mr. William Holbrook threw away the last of his cigarette sup-

ply and groaned. She had said in his hearing that she would only stay a few minutes. Five hours had passed, and the girl had not come out.

What should he do? Following the departure of the doctor, he had knocked at the door, but his knock had gone unheeded. If Dr. Laffin kept servants, they were beyond the sound of the summons.

Again he looked up at the window, and then:

"Pretty easy house that—to a professional, I mean," said a voice in his ear, and he jerked round, startled.

Toby Marsh was at his elbow—even without his thick rubber-soled shoes, Toby had the habit of noiseless walking.

GETTING IN

"One of the lower orders, by which I mean the common or criminal classes, would hesitate to approach a gentleman with the plain and straightforward statement that any burglar, who had taken a lesson from a correspondence school, would find that house as easy as opening a box of matches," said Mr. Marsh. "It is so simple that a specialist, would say 'There's a trap.' "

"Where the devil did you come from?" asked Bill, recovering from his surprise.

"I've been watching you for the last three hours," said Mr. Marsh calmly, "and you've been watching the house. There is a certain Latin saying, which I haven't got at my finger tips, about who shall watch the watcher? The answer is—Hubert Francis Marsh—Toby, for short."

Bill's eyes had strayed to the window.

"Could you get into that room if you wanted?"

"Could I get into that room if I wanted?" Toby Marsh was amused. "I could fall into that room from the street —if I wanted! The question is, do I want? There is another question." He ticked it off on the second of his long, delicate fingers. "Why does Laffin fix bars to his window with his own hands—being in such a hurry that he couldn't wait for a workman, but bought the iron

himself, at Colbord & Willing's in Finsbury Road, and darned nearly broke his neck trying to screw 'em in? I ask you again, why? And my answer is——"

"A lemon," said the irritated Bill. Suddenly: "I want to talk to that young lady. Now, how am I going to do it?"

"In other words, you want to get into that house. The only suggestion I can make to you is that I open the door for you."

"Could you?" asked Bill, incredulously.

"Is there anything easier?" asked the other, with an air of weariness. "Will you resume your post of observation? And have no fear for me; in five minutes you will see the door open. Walk right in—I shall not be there; I am discreet."

He dismissed his awe-stricken audience with a nod, and Bill went back to his vigil and his doubts. One at least was set at rest four minutes after he had returned to his post. The front door moved slightly, and, walking across the road, he ran up the garden path, entered the hall and closed the door behind him. There was no sign of Toby Marsh. True to his promise in every respect, he had both opened the door and disappeared.

Bill did not stop to consider the consequences. He waited only to get his bearings, and then he went up the dark stairs, holding a lighted match. Two flights he traversed, and then his further progress was held up by a door which was heavily padlocked.

"Who is that?" said a voice on the other side.

"Holbrook," was the answer, and she uttered a cry of thankfulness that made the next question unnecessary.

"Has the old man locked you in?"

"Yes; can you open the door, please?"

Bill felt at the padlock.

"I can't open it legitimately, but if you'll wait, I'll go down below and see what there is."

He was halfway down the second flight when, in an alcove, he saw in the light of his match a hideous face glaring at him from the gloom. It was a squat African

idol, and, dropping his match, he lifted it with some difficulty to the floor, for it was made of ironwood and was exceptionally heavy. Nevertheless, if it could be handled from the precarious foothold of the stairs, he guessed it would be sufficient.

"Stand away from the door," he said. "I'm going to try to break it in, but I'm not sure that I'll be successful."

Exerting all his strength, he swung back the *bête,* and brought it with a crash against the door at the place where the padlock was fastened. Such was the weight of his battering-ram that the hasp snapped, but the door stood firm. He waited awhile till he had recovered his breath, and then repeated the blow, driving the feet of the idol at a place level with the keyhole. To his gratification, the door burst open with a crash, and the weight of the wooden figure overbalanced him, so that he fell almost at the girl's feet.

"Is this housebreaking or burglary, I wonder?" he said, as he rolled the hideous figure out of sight. "Now, young lady, if you're ready——"

"Hurry, please hurry!" she said.

They had reached the hall, when they heard a key in the lock.

"In the study," whispered the girl.

It was the doctor; she heard and recognised his little affected cough.

Would he go straight upstairs or make for the study? Invariably he went to his room first. Footsteps passed the door, and she listened intently. Was he going up the stairs? The stair carpet was so thick that she could not hear, but after a while he coughed again, and this time the sound came from above. Instantly they were in the passage, and she had opened the door.

"Who is there!" It was Laffin's voice calling them from the first landing.

Bill swung the front door close after him with a crash, and they raced down the path together, turned into Camden Road, and did not slacken pace until they saw

the shadowy figure of a policeman ahead of them, and deemed it expedient not to excite his suspicions.

"Now where are you going?"

"I'm going back to my lodgings," she said. "I can't tell you how grateful I am to you, Mr. Holbrook. But how did you get in?"

Bill coughed.

"A friend of mine opened the door. When I say a friend of mine," he explained. "I mean that he's a—er—a professional door-opener with whom I am acquainted. Why did he lock you up? I suppose it was Laffin?"

She nodded.

"Yes, it was Dr. Laffin," she said quietly, "but that is all I can tell you. His conduct is as much of a mystery to me as it is to you. I only know that I was terribly frightened, and that when you came through that door I could have fallen on your neck."

"That wasn't at all necessary," said Bill.

"But why did you come in? How did you know I was there?"

"I had been watching the house; in fact, I saw you arrive, and heard you remark that you would not be longer than five minutes. At the end of five hours I began to think that you had changed your mind."

They walked along in silence for five minutes.

"You're a queer man," she said. "I think I may have been mistaken in you."

Bill looked at her quickly.

"Until I know what your first impressions were, I am not able to enlighten you," he said.

"Well, I thought you were bumptious, pushful, and—rather thick-skinned," she said frankly.

"That's right," nodded Bill, "I'm all those. If you were William K. Holbrook you would also be bumptious and self-satisfied."

"Did you see Lord Lowbridge?" she asked.

"Lord Lowbridge? Is that the Apollo Belvedere person. Yes, he came out at the same time as friend Laffin. I'll bet he isn't laffin' now."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"A low jest, which doesn't bear repetition," he said guiltily. "Yes, I saw Lord Lowbridge. He's the only lord I've ever seen that looks like one; most of the peerage of this country are such miserable devils that I want to pat them on the back, and say 'Never mind.' But I can imagine that guy—gentleman, in a suit of armour, chasing dragons and rescuing maidens and appropriating other people's castles. Now, Miss Carew," he stopped, "I won't go any farther with you, or I shall lose my reputation. No man has ever associated my name with a lady, and I don't want any of these snooping reporters to go spreading reports in Fleet Street about my forthcoming nuptials."

She laughed.

"If I didn't know you were joking, I'd be very angry with you. As it is, I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"Then don't try. You'll be doing your window-dressing act to-morrow?"

"No," she said quietly, "that is finished."

"Finished to-day?" His head was thrust toward her, his voice was eager. "Finished this afternoon? Did the old man tell you that? And he pinched you to-night—gosh!"

She was a little bewildered.

"I don't see the connection, but it is a fact that I'm not going to Duke Street any more."

"Where are you staying to-night, Miss Carew?" he asked.

She gave him her address, and he jotted it down on the back of an old envelope.

"You have money, I suppose?" he asked, and, though she smiled, she appreciated the thought. "Now, hurry home," he said paternally.

"Where will you go? You're not going back?" she asked in alarm.

He nodded.

"Yes, I'm curious to see what happens."

He waited until she was gone, and then retraced his

footsteps. Evidently something remarkable had occurred, for there was a small crowd before the gate of Dr. Laffin's house. The front door was open, and in the hall lights he saw two policemen talking to a dishevelled Laffin. Pushing through the crowd, he made his way up the steps into the hall, and at sight of him the old man's brows met.

"What do you want?" he demanded sharply.

"I've just come along to see what was the trouble," said Bill.

All the habitual calm of Dr. Joshua Laffin had vanished; he was a quivering, raging fury.

"What has happened!" he screamed. "I'll tell you what has happened! Some thief has stolen a golden buckle . . . worth a fortune . . . the diamond and golden buckle of Isis." He was frothing at the mouth.

Bill's heart nearly stopped beating. Toby Marsh! The obliging burglar had not been so disinterested as he thought.

"You get out!" The doctor yelled the words. "Officer, put that man out; I will not have him here. What right have you . . . ?"

One of the policemen stooped his head significantly, and Bill, who knew the way of the blue custodians, went out meekly. He wondered whether he should tell Bullott. Fortunately for him, Mr. Bullott was not at home.

As he approached his house, he saw a man sitting on the doorstep, and his figure seemed familiar.

"Why, Marsh!" he said. "How on earth did you get here?"

"Walked," was the laconic reply. "Bullott's out. Was there any trouble down Camden Road?"

"I should say there was," said Bill drily. "Marsh, I didn't expect you to do that sort of thing. Burglary is a serious offence."

"So is receiving," said Toby Marsh blandly, "if you're talking about that diamond buckle. It's in your right-hand coat pocket, Mr. Holbrook."

Bill thrust his hand into his pocket, felt something hard and sharp, as his fingers closed over an uneven surface. When he brought his hand forth he uttered a cry of amazement and consternation. In his hand was a curiously shaped object, almost as big as his palm. It bore no resemblance to a buckle, looking more like a large baggage tag, and it was alive with flashing fires.

"Good God!" he gasped. "How did that come there?"

"I put it there," said Mr. Marsh calmly. "I was in the study, and it struck me that, if I walked out and ran into the hands of the coppers, the presence of that incriminating evidence in my pocket might lead to disastrous results, especially as I only went into the house to do you a turn."

"You seem to have been doing yourself a little good," said Bill grimly. "What would have happened to me if they'd found it in my pocket?"

"Nothing. You're an honest man, and if the worst had come to the worst I should have appeared at the local police station, and made a statement, exculpating—remember that word, which is both correct and classy—exculpating you from any complicity. The lower orders would describe my action as lunacy, but I not only know that I am an altruist, but can pronounce the word. Can I see you in private?"

Bill hesitated. "Come in," he said curtly, and took the visitor up to his sitting-room.

"Never been in Bullott's house before," said Marsh, eyeing the furnishings with a critical and approving eye. "For a man who has been doing office work all his life, and has had none of the opportunities for bribery and corruption which his brethren have, it is a little remarkable that he's got such a nice place. He's a bachelor, of course? If he were married he couldn't afford this house. Personally, I prefer the woman's touch; and though Mrs. Hamshaw, my respected landlady, lacks the essentials of

refinement, she has connections with the superior order, and her daughter, being one of the wealthy classes, supplies many of her deficiencies."

"I hate to interrupt your crackajack oration," said Bill quietly, "but, Marsh, what are you going to do about this interesting jewel?"

He had laid it on the table, and in the better light could admire the exquisite workmanship of the old Egyptian craftsman who had fashioned the lucky buckle of the goddess.

"It is exactly that matter I want to speak about," said Mr. Marsh. "May I smoke?"

He produced his gold cigarette case with a flourish, and, with another flourish, opened it. Bill selected the cigarette he was offered, and waited until the case went back to the burglar's pocket.

"Now my suggestion is, that you take that buckle"—he spoke very slowly and deliberately, punctuating every other word with a puff of smoke—"and you place it in the vaults of your bank. If you have no bank, or if, perchance, your bank has no vault, then I suggest you should hand it to the Public Trustee."

Bill frowned at him.

"When you have finished being comic——"

"I am not being comic at all, Mr. Holbrook," said the other innocently. "I am merely offering a suggestion as to the best way of safeguarding Miss Elizabeth Carew's property."

"Miss Carew?"

Toby Marsh nodded.

"She isn't aware of the fact that it is her property, and at the same time Dr. Josh. Laffin isn't aware that I'm aware that it is her property. In fact, he believes that nobody in the wide world except himself and one who shall be nameless—forgive my mysteriousness, but that is my vice—has the least knowledge of that buckle's existence.

Bullott had come in; Bill heard him moving about alone.

"Marsh, do you mind if I discuss this matter with Bullott?" he asked.

"I very much mind," was the prompt reply. "Bullott is a policeman, a man whose mental qualities have never been completely tested. I appreciate your difficulty, Mr. Holbrook, but Bullott isn't going to get you out."

Bill weighed the buckle in his hand, and then, opening a drawer of his desk, locked it away.

"What did you do with the paper?" asked the amazing burglar. "The paper it was wrapped in when I put it in your pocket? I tore it from a book in the safe, and I'd like to see it."

Bill put his hand into his pocket, and felt a crumpled paper, which he drew to the light. It was from an old, fine-lined exercise book, and the writing was bold and irregular.

> "Money is life. Without money life is misery. We have only one life to live—every second should be consciously enjoyed. This is only possible if you have money. Death is untroubled sleep. Life without money is full of pain and irritation. There is no excuse for poverty. Aim at millions. A man with a million can buy a new conscience. Moral codes are made by monied people to keep us poor . . ."

"Who is the author of this thoroughly immoral philosophy?" asked Bill, in surprise. "It doesn't look like Laffin's writing."

Mr. Toby Marsh did not often smile, but his face was puckered now in a grin of sheer enjoyment.

"To me it is as clear as the dome of St. Paul's on a sunny day," he said.

Bullott was coming up the stairs, and would presently knock at the door.

"I suppose you don't want to see the inspector? I ask you this because he's liable to come up at any minute," said Bill.

"I want to dwell in harmony with all men," he said. "If he comes, I shall treat him with respect. I've got

nothing on Bullott. I'll take that paper, if you don't mind." He folded the torn page carefully, and put it in his pocket.

"The question is whether Bullott has anything on you," chuckled Bill, as he heard the landlord's knock, and opened the door to him.

Bullott comprehended the visitor in one glance.

"Good evening—brother," he said, and there was such significance in the word that Bill looked from one to the other.

There was a twinkle in Toby Marsh's eye.

"We're Sons of Ragousa, him and me," he said. "Take my tip, Mr. Holbrook—get in whilst the getting is cheap."

"You've joined the Sons of Ragousa?"

"Proud Sons," corrected Mr. Marsh soberly. "Yes, and the inspector joined the same night."

Bill looked from one to the other.

"But why?" he asked at last. "What is there about the Ragousas that is so fascinating that it brings you two boys into the same camp?"

"The Proud Sons of Ragousa," explained Toby, "started off with more degrees than they had members. I believe there were forty in all. But the ritual was a little bit too complicated, and the members difficult to handle. To-day there are only five. There is the ordinary degree, into which you'll be initiated if you're wise; there's the High Degree, which is a sort of district lodge; there's the Grand Lodge Degree; there's the Twenty-Third; and over and above these, the priors of the order—they're the real swells, who give the law, fix the ritual, distribute the argosies, and administer the order from top to bottom. Now, you've got to remember this about the Ragousas—that, when you're clear of the Grand Lodge, you're unknown! The Grand Lodge doesn't hold elections and say that this guy or that guy shall be a member of the Twenty-Third Degree, or shall be promoted to a prior; the men up above just notify the man they want, and automatically he becomes one of them."

"But surely," interrupted Bill, "the Grand Lodge miss a familiar face?"

Toby grinned mysteriously.

"Wait and see about that face stuff," he said. "But you've put your finger on the real mystery of the Ragousas. When you're initiated at the little lodge in Edgware Road, you may be in the presence of the priors, you may be hobnobbing with members of the Twenty-Third Degree, you may be meeting the Grand Prior himself and never know it. And the worshipful master of the lodge wouldn't know either. The Ragousas accept discipline from above; there are no elections outside the lower lodge, which chooses its own officers; and a fellow who's been through the chair passes back to the rank and file without any further promotion, unless he receives a letter telling him he has been appointed to one of the higher degrees, and giving instructions as to where he must go and what he must do. If a man kicks, or wants some other way of running the society, they throw him out. If he kicks again, they get at him in such a way that they can't be traced. He'll lose his job, or his landlord will throw him into the street without notice. They've been known to buy a house over a man's head in order to get him out of his business. The discipline is fine! The kick comes from the Twenty-Third Degree—and the Grand Master of the Twenty-Third Degree is Joshua Laffin, Doctor of Medicines!"

BROTHER JOHN

Betty Carew felt something more than a mental relief in the knowledge that her nightmare experience was at an end. She awoke from a deep, refreshing sleep, and it was significant that her first thought was one of heartfelt gratitude that she had not to appear in that horrible shop window.

She had hardly finished her breakfast before her landlady came into the dining-room and announced a visitor.

Clive! She looked at the clock; it was half-past nine. Then he must have heard what had happened.

One glance at his face confirmed this opinion.

"I've just come from that old devil," he said vigorously, "and I don't think he'll forget my visit! The brute! If I'd only guessed what he had done . . . I thought it was strange that he hurried me out of the house so quickly."

She arrested an explosive view of the doctor's conduct with a laugh.

"But why did he do it?" insisted Clive, his brow wrinkled in perplexity.

"I hope you haven't quarrelled with him?" she smiled. "You cannot judge him by normal standards."

"Maybe one of these days he will be judged by standards that will be too normal for his health," said Clive Lowbridge. "Betty, it terrifies me to think that this man could have been so outrageous. You're not going back to the shop again? I came to insist upon that."

"I am not going back, anyway," she said. "The doctor has finished with me as a show-girl. Apparently, having made me a public exhibition, he desired to keep me for private view!"

At his request she told him what had happened since she left Duke Street.

"Holbrook?" he said thoughtfully. "That is our advertising gentleman. He doesn't seem to be so objectionable as I thought. I owe him one for that. Where is he to be found?"

She laughed softly.

"He not only did not give me his address, but he was most chary of being seen in public with me," she said whimsically. "Poor man! I fear he thought I had matrimonial designs—he really is funny, Clive."

"I should say he was," said the indignant Clive. "Matrimonial designs indeed! He couldn't even help you without being offensive. What are you going to do, Betty?"

She told him of such plans as she had formed. She was seeing De Fell, the theatrical manager, that day, and

hoped to get a part in his new play. He agreed, but with no enthusiasm. He was leaving, when a thought occurred to him.

"By the way, I don't think I should tell anybody else about Holbrook. You know that the doctor claims he lost a very valuable buckle—worth a fortune apparently?"

"Not the buckle of Isis?" she said in amazement.

"You knew about it, did you?" he asked quickly. "Yes, that is the thing which has been lost. Apparently the old man has had it for some time, and the loss is a very considerable one to him."

"But when was it stolen?"

"Last night. He went into his study, found his safe open and the buckle gone. That is the second burglary he has had in a week. Obviously, if Holbrook was on the premises, he would be suspected."

"Then whoever suspected him would be wrong," she said promptly. "Mr. Holbrook did not know where the study was until I pushed him in to hide from Dr. Laffin. He may be many things, but he is not a burglar."

"Then how on earth did he get into the house?" he demanded.

It was a question she had asked herself, for she knew something of the precautions which Laffin had taken to avoid a repetition of a previous visitation.

Fortunately, she had not much time to think about things that morning. She telephoned to De Fell at his house, and was given an appointment, and at half-past eleven she was on the deserted stage at the Pallodrome Theatre, waiting an opportunity to speak to the busy young man, who was deep in conversation with a good-looking, white-haired man, oblivious to the rehearsal which was proceeding, and which involved a considerable amount of noise and movement, for the producer was licking his "pony" chorus into shape. Presently he saw her, lifted his hat and smiled, and beckoned her across to him.

"This is one of the most promising of our younger actresses," he said, to her surprise and pleasure. "Meet

Miss Carew. Mr. Stone is an American, who has nothing to do with the theatrical business, Miss Carew. Also he is a confirmed bachelor, one of the richest men in California, and a very good friend of mine."

Betty took the proffered hand with a little smile.

"You're not even interested in this production, Mr. Stone?" said Betty, a little awkwardly.

"No, Miss Carew." Lambert Stone shook his head. "This world is one apart. And, frankly, its only merit in my eyes is its association with De Fell."

"That is bad news for a fortune-hunting actress," she said with mock solemnity. "'Confirmed bachelor' is a challenge to every self-respecting woman!"

"I shouldn't think so," he said. "I was confirmed in my bachelordom many years ago, but if I were shaken at all from my fixed determination to go through life without adding to the natural miseries of any woman, now would be the moment."

They both laughed together, and for the time being Betty was so absorbed in the personality of her new acquaintance that she forgot her errand. It was De Fell who reminded her.

"I hope you haven't come for that part, Miss Carew?" he said. "I kept it open until last Saturday, but now it is filled."

Seeing her crestfallen face, he asked quickly:

"Is it a matter of vital importance to you?"

"No," she said, with a smile, "if you mean, am I without money!"

"I'm opening in eight weeks' time at the Grand," he said. "If you can last till then, I will give you a really good part."

The news was disappointing, but in a way she was glad. She had worked without a break for seven months—she had come into *The Girl from Fez* from a road tour—and the month of idleness was welcome. On her way home she decided to call at the Orpheum to collect a few of her belongings. Happily, the theatre was empty, the rehearsals for the new play not having started, and she

packed her bag at her leisure, and carried it downstairs to the little hall where the stage doorkeeper kept his vigil.

"I forgot to tell you, Miss," said the janitor, "there's been a man here making inquiries about you." "He wanted to know where you lived, but, of course, I couldn't tell him that. And then he asked me if you were any relation to Dr. Laffin."

This was surprising, for her association with Dr. Laffin was not generally known in the theatrical world.

"Who was he, Jones?"

"I don't know, Miss, but he's a very nice-spoken gentleman—a clergyman; at least, he looks like a clergyman," he added cautiously.

He went out to find a taxi for her, and returned with news.

"He's waiting on the other side of the road, Miss. Do you want to see him?"

"Who—the clergyman?" she asked, startled.

A SHOT IN THE STREET

She went to the door and looked out. Walking slowly along the opposite sidewalk was a short, stout man, with a long black beard. If he were not a clergyman, the janitor's mistake was pardonable, for his clothes were of the severest black, and on his head was a low-crowned hat such as ministers wear. She thought a moment, then:

"Will you ask him to come over, Jones?" she said.

A few minutes later the stage doorkeeper returned, ushering in the bearded stranger.

"Are you Miss Carew?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm Miss Carew. You wished to see me?"

His voice was strangely familiar. She had heard it before somewhere, but, racking her brains, she could not recall a meeting.

"Yes, I wished to see you." He hesitated. "My name is—" again he paused—"Brother John. At least, I'm called Brother John by my friends."

He had the slightest trace of an American accent, she thought. And she knew him! She was certain they had met somewhere, but for the life of her she could not remember.

The janitor had discreetly retired to his box.

"You are Dr. Laffin's ward, are you not?"

She nodded.

"And you are an actress, too, Miss Carew?"

"Yes, I am an actress," she said, wondering what was coming next.

"Am I wrong in believing that you were the lady who appeared as lately as yesterday in the window of a store on Duke Street?"

Betty flushed.

"Yes, I am that unfortunate individual," she said, with a little smile. "I hope you haven't come to buy a desk?"

"No, Miss Carew, I have come on no such mission; but I would like to ask you, if it is permissible—and I realise that I may be going beyond the bounds of pertinence—why you undertook that extraordinary work?"

Her first inclination was to return a discouraging reply, but there was such a queer anxiety in his face that she changed her mind.

"I went there at the request of Dr. Laffin," she said.

"Did Dr. Laffin take you into his confidence?" he asked. And then, hastily: "I mean, do you know why you were so employed?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," she answered shortly. "The only thing I am certain about is, that in no circumstances would I again endure such misery as I suffered during the very short time I was on exhibition."

"Was there . . . was it part of your duties to give a message to somebody who called?" he asked.

Without hesitation she nodded.

"I fear you think that I am an impertinent man," said Brother John, "but this matter touches me very dearly, and involves the peace and happiness of one for whom I have a very deep affection, and I am sure that, when

you realise this, you will forgive what may seem the unpardonable liberty I am taking."

"Perhaps you will tell me something?" she replied. "What was in Dr. Laffin's mind when he asked me to undertake that work?"

He shook his head.

"I am afraid I can't tell you that," he said.

"You are a priest, aren't you?" she asked.

He shook his head sadly.

"No, Madam, I am not a priest. I was an ordained priest of the Episcopal Church, but I was—unfrocked, for holding views which met with the disapproval of my bishop."

He held out his hand, and she took it.

"I am very glad that you knew nothing," he said simply, and before she could frame another question he was gone.

When she came out into the street she saw his broad shoulders vanish round the corner of the block. The mystery of the desk-selling proposition had become so intensified, that to think about it any more was sheer madness. So she was telling herself, when a voice hailed her, and she turned to meet Mr. William Holbrook, miraculously tidy and presentable.

"I have been chasing you along from De Fell's," he said. "I wanted to see you before that old doctor man starts asking you questions."

"About the burglary?" she asked quickly.

Bill's face fell. "You've seen him, then?"

"I haven't seen him," she smiled, "but I've seen Lord Lowbridge, and he told me what had happened. Of course, it is too ridiculous for words! You hadn't an opportunity——"

"Did you mention the fact that I was in the house?" he asked anxiously, and, when she told him she had, he whistled.

"I can see myself getting pinched," he said.

She interrupted him.

"Mr. Holbrook," she said, acting on a sudden impulse, "have you any idea why I was put into that

wretched window to sell desks?" And, before he could answer, she told him of the interview she had just had with Brother John.

Bill listened, and scratched his head.

"That is a new one," he said. "But just tell me about that message?"

She wished now that she had not taken him into her confidence, but it was futile to leave half the story untold, and briefly she described the mysterious individual in sandals and cassock, who had come from the crowd, and who had received a very commonplace letter with such marks of reverence.

"And I'm sure I know Brother John. I've heard his voice before, but, however hard I try, I cannot place him."

Bill Holbrook thought quickly.

"Which way did Brother John go?" he asked, and, when she indicated the direction: "Do you mind if I walk with you?"

"I can survive the contamination of your company if you can survive mine," said Betty drily. "Unless my memory is at fault, you objected to my compromising society last night."

"I was known in that neighbourhood," said Bill, unabashed. "Here I am a comparative stranger. Gee! I'd like to lay hands on that bearded padre. There *is* a big story in this stunt of the doctor's.

"I'm going to get this story right," he went on, and stopped suddenly.

Ahead of him a small crowd had congregated on the sidewalk. Over the heads of the people he saw the helmets of two policemen.

"Just one moment," he said, and ran on ahead of her.

Pushing his way through the crowd, he came to a clear space, where a man lay on his back, his arms outstretched, a look of peace upon his white face.

"Shot!" said an excited voice in his ear. "Shot dead . . . and in the street, too! Just a *plop!* Shot fired from a car . . . used a silencer . . ."

One glance he gave, and then, elbowing back to the girl, he caught her by the arm, and dragged her back to the space in the centre where the dead man lay.

"Who is that?" he asked softly.

She looked and screamed. It was Brother John!

THE MAN IN CHARGE

"Do you know this man, Miss?" One of the policemen was speaking.

"Yes—no," she stammered. "I saw him a few minutes ago. He came to the stage door of the Orpheum to see me, but I had never met him before. Is he—is he dead?"

"I think so, Miss—the doctor will be here in a moment. Do you mind giving me your name and address?"

Betty obeyed like one in a dream, and then, when the officer's interrogation was finished, Bill Holbrook's hand tightened about her arm, and he led her out of sight of the pitiable object that lay so silent upon the sidewalk. Bill's face was tense, his eyes bright.

"I told you so, I told you so!" he almost croaked. "They shot him down as he was walking away from you! They must have been watching him all the time."

"But who—who?" she asked, bewildered.

"I'll tell you that one day, and it's a day that is not very far ahead, Betty Carew."

He whistled a taxi, bundled her in, and joined her, after giving directions which revealed to her, though she was too numbed to be astonished, that he knew where she lived, and he left her at the door of her lodgings.

"You'll stay in your house until I come for you, and you won't move out otherwise. You can take that as an order, a prayer or a polite request, whichever you like best."

"Yes," she said meekly.

"There's going to be trouble—a whole lot—for somebody, and I don't want you to be in it." He was speaking rapidly. "When the police come to question you,

you're to tell them that Brother John called to ask you to take part in some charity entertainment."

"But—" she began.

"Don't 'but'," he said savagely. "Do as I tell you. You've got to keep out of this, and you'll only keep out if you can lie a little. Will you promise me?"

She nodded, incapable of speech.

Holbrook's first act, after leaving the girl, was to make his way to the nearest telephone booth, and to call Bullott's house. The inspector, who had never made an arrest, must be in this case by hook or by crook. Bullott was out, his housekeeper told him.

"Maybe you'll find him at the Welcome Club."

Bill tried the Welcome Club, a little rendezvous less than a mile from the scene of the murder, and, to his amazement it was Bullott who answered his call.

"Get down to Horsham Street as quickly as you can. There's been a murder committed there," said Bill rapidly, "a real daylight shooting—your chance! I'll wait for you at the corner of the street; be there in a quarter of an hour. In the meantime, I'm going along to see the police in charge of the case, and to bluff them that you're already on it. Do you hear?" he asked impatiently, when Bullott did not reply.

"I'll be there," said Bullott's voice.

By the time he got back to the street where the murder was committed the body had been moved and the street wore its normal appearance. He made an inquiry of the first constable he met, and then hurried on to the hospital where the mortal remains of Brother John had been taken. As he ran up the steps, an inspector of police came out. He was known to Bill Holbrook, and his cheery greeting encouraged him in his purpose.

"Are you after that street murder?" he asked. "If you are, I'm not in the case. I've just telephoned the Yard, and the Chief tells me he is sending a man down."

"You can telephone up and tell them that the man is here on the spot," said Bill rapidly. "Inspector Bullott has already begun his investigations."

"You don't mean Bullott, of the Record Department?"

"That's the guy I'm advertising—the greatest sleuth we've had on the Thames Embankment in years," said Bill glibly. "He practically saw the murder committed, and went after the car. You'll save a whole lot of trouble, Staines, if you tip off headquarters that he's on the spot."

The inspector hesitated.

"I don't know whether I can do that on your authority—" he began.

"If you don't do it now, you'll have no chance of avoiding trouble," said Bill urgently. "You can't have two men in charge of the case, and you know what the Yard people are—as jealous as cats—and you'll be the goat."

Reluctantly the inspector went back to the telephone, and, to his relief, learnt that the officer who was to have been put in charge of the case had not yet been notified. He was more surprised when he learnt that, with extraordinary promptitude, the Chief accepted the presence of Bullott as a normal circumstance.

A quarter of an hour later, Bill, standing at the corner of Horsham Street, saw a taxi drive up, and Bullott jumped out to greet him.

"I've founded your reputation, Bullott," said the reporter breathlessly. "You're in charge of this street murder case. Now, remember this: you've been here ever since the shot was fired, and if you haven't got the number of the car, why, you ought to have!"

"The number of the car," said Bullott, calmly, "was XQ.9743, and it will interest you to know that I not only saw the car, but I saw the shot fired, and if a traffic cop hadn't held me at Holborn, I'd have had the murderer under lock and key at this very minute."

Bill looked at him and gasped.

"You saw the murder?" said Bill, incredulously. "You're not pulling one on me?"

"No, I'm telling the truth. I saw the car—a big limousine—though I didn't notice the parson until he was

down. In fact, the shot was fired, and the man had fallen before I guessed what had happened. It was then that I sprinted after the machine, saw its number, and jumping on the first taxi I overtook, chased it as far as Holborn. Here, there was a block, and the car managed to get through just before the east and west traffic was released by the traffic cop. It is a hired machine from Stanbury's, of Notting Hill, and the driver has already reported. He says he dropped his fare near the new Bush Building; doesn't know him from a crow; hasn't any idea of his name, his address or his business. What is certain is that the car was specially engaged to shadow the priest. It was ordered by telephone, and the fare was picked up in Trafalgar Square—a tall man with a long black moustache and horn-rimmed glasses—the chauffeur thinks that he was an American. The chauffeur found the empty case of an automatic shell between the matting and the floor of the car—we've something to go on, but lordy! I'm scared, Holbrook! If I'd only overtaken that machine, in the heat of the moment, I guess I could have arrested the fellow without any qualms. But now . . . !"

His panic was not apparent to the officials who assisted him in a search of the body. No papers of any kind were discovered; beyond a little money and a worn copy of *Spiritual Reflections,* bearing on the flyleaf the words "To John, from his mother," and dated 1883, there was nothing to identify the murdered man.

After the examination he joined Bill, who had been waiting patiently outside the hospital, and told him the result of the search.

The young man thought it was a propitious moment to tell him of the strange interview that Betty had had that morning with the bearded man.

"This hasn't got to go into your report, Bullott, because I wish that young woman's name kept out of the newspapers. And what she has to tell will not help any."

Mr. Bullott was filling his pipe, and his mild eyes fixed upon his lodger.

"What's she to you?" he asked.

Bill Holbrook was annoyed to the point of incoherence.

THE INITIATION

Lodge No. 1107 of the Proud Sons of Ragousa was housed in a hall that had been an unsuccessful cinema theatre, and, having been purchased by the Proud Sons, had, at no inconsiderable cost, been converted to the use of the order.

As in the case of most Ragousa lodges, the outer lobby was fitted up as a reception office. In many ways it resembled the lobby of a small hotel, with its desks at which, under shaded lights, three men sat writing when Bill Holbrook arrived that evening. The whole proceedings were most businesslike, he thought, as he sat down to read and fill in the blank that was given him.

It was a most innocuous document, in which he had to write his name, address and profession, and to sign a declaration that he would abide by the rules of the Order, and agreed to accept dismissal from its membership if he transgressed the governing laws.

"That will cost you two pounds," said the official briskly, when he returned the blank, "one pound half-yearly subscription and one pound for your robe. Your number is H.74—remember to tell the worshipful keeper of the robes that. Now, sir, if you will knock at that door, two of the brethren will prepare you for the initiation—yours is the only one to-night."

At the far end of the vestibule was a double door of polished wood, and on this Holbrook knocked. The doors opened instantly, and for a second he was so startled by what he saw that he made no move. Two men were standing in the inner hall, which was in darkness except for two lamps hanging from the ceiling, which gave so faint a light that they only served to emphasise the gloom. The men were dressed from head to foot in black; their heads were covered by cowls, and over each face

was a loose black covering. Only the eyes showed through long slits.

"Enter, Brother-to-be," said one in a shrill, Cockney voice, and the door closed behind him.

The man who had spoken was carrying something over his arm.

"Put this on," he said, and Bill saw that it was a robe similar to those they wore.

In a minute he was covered, the cowl drawn over his head, and the eye apertures adjusted.

"Speak now, stranger, on the threshold of our mysteries: by land and water, by the air and the spaces beneath the earth, do you seek the brotherhood of our noble order with a pure heart and a desire to serve humanity? Answer 'I do.'"

The second man gabbled the question mechanically.

"I do," said Bill.

The man struck three times upon an inner door.

"Who comes?" asked a deep voice.

"A strange mariner for our argosies," was the reply.

"Enter, Son-to-be," said the voice.

The big hall into which Bill walked between his guardians was as dimly illuminated as the outer room. Ranged round the walls on chairs he saw line after line of cowled figures. At one end of the room was a raised daïs, where three figures sat behind a table. Facing them, and at the opposite end of the room, sat a solitary man. Except for the robes and the cowls, Holbrook had anticipated the lay-out of the lodge. On the table before the three was a small silver ship of ancient design. It evidently stood upon a sheet of glass beneath which was a concealed light, for its sails glittered brilliantly.

Bill was led to the solitary figure, and there began the initiation service. He was charged to be a true Son of Ragousa, "fearless in danger, keen in enterprise, thrifty in prosperity," and, prompted by his conductors, he made the conventional replies. From the Captain of the Lodge, as he discovered this officer to be, he was taken to the three, and there received what was obviously the

key instruction—the order of obedience. At last it was over, and he was shown to a chair that had been left vacant on one side of the hall, and became thereafter an interested audience to the discussion of lodge business. Who were his right or left hand neighbours, he could not guess.

The discussion that followed bored him; an exchange between the chair and one of the orators of the lodge on what was and what was not true philanthropy. The arguments were feeble, the speeches poor in the extreme, and he was relieved when, rising in his place, the Captain of the Lodge lifted his hands in benediction, and chanted:

"To all Proud Sons of Ragousa, to all officers of lodges, to the noble members of the High Degree, to the exalted brethren of the Grand Lodge, to the most reverend and puissant Priors, and to the most exalted, noble and holy Grand Prior, dedicate we our lives and faiths, our hopes and services."

There was no mention of the Twenty-Third Degree, Bill noticed, and wondered what was the explanation for so notable an omission.

The members filed out in silence, not the way by which he had come, but to a disrobing room. This was in complete darkness. As every man stepped into the little lobby, he slipped off his coat and cowl and handed it to some hidden person, giving his number.

He took his place at the end of the slow-moving queue, and had nearly reached the door, when somebody tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to look into a cowled face.

"In the name of the Prior," said the figure in a low voice. "The Grand Lodge has need of you. You will be at the third milestone on the Epping Road at eleven o'clock on Sunday night."

He pressed a paper into the hand of the astonished reporter, and without another word walked swiftly past the waiting queue into the dark room.

When Bill came out through the side entrance of the lodge, he found Toby Marsh pacing the sidewalk.

"Well, what do you think of it—brother?"

"I have attended hangings that have been more cheerful," said Bill.

"Hear anything about the Twenty-Third Degree?" he asked.

"No, it was not mentioned. Why is that?"

"The Twenty-Third is *tabu* amongst the Sons—it is the punishing degree, and is never mentioned. And yet there were at least two men there to-night who were Twenty-Thirders until last week—fired, boy!"

"Fired?"

"Reduced from the Twenty-Third to the First. That's the way of the Ragousas; you never know whether you're up or whether you're down."

"My own promotion has been so rapid that I'm dizzy," said Bill, and told him of his appointment to the Grand Lodge.

Toby's face was serious. "That's quick!" he said. "Where are they to pick you up?"

"At the third milestone on the Epping Road, wherever that may be," said Bill, "but probably there are more instructions here."

He stopped under a street-lamp, and unrolled the little scrap of paper he still held in his hand. He looked and uttered an exclamation. The paper was a banknote for a hundred pounds!

JENNY HAMSHAW

"NOBODY knows anything. Who are the members of the Grand Lodge, where it holds its meetings, who are the Twenty-Thirders, and why. The only thing the poor simps are sure about is that twice a year there is money for nothing for somebody. And for the rest, they're satisfied to go on gripping and passwording and secret-signing, and singing their silly songs, and rooting for their silly lodges," said Toby Marsh.

"Who does know?" asked Inspector Bullott, taking his pipe from his mouth.

"The Grand Prior, and nobody else," said Toby promptly. "I've been into this because I thought it was good graft. I've nosed and I've pried, and I've brought the Sons of Ragousa down to the Book of the Law."

"What the devil is the Book of the Law?" asked the astonished police officer.

"It's a book that has the ritual and system of the Ragousas written down to the last dot. The Grand Prior wrote it, and the Grand Prior has it. When the Grand Prior dies, it will be handed over to the new Grand Prior. That is the story I've heard, and it sounds true."

"Is there any graft in it at all?" asked Bill.

Toby Marsh shook his head.

"No; that is the surprising thing about the Ragousas. It's an honest-to-heaven society; does a whole lot of good, builds cottage hospitals for seamen, donates lifeboats—most of its lodges are in maritime towns, and, I suppose, a third of its membership is made up of sailors —it runs an orphanage at Newcastle, and a home for old sailors at Gosport. They're certainly tough with members who get fresh or who defy their rules, but so far as I know, even in this they have never broken a law. There have been no whippings or burnings, and I haven't been able to trace an old Ragousa that has been ridden out of town on a rail. Oh yes, they're all right, only—" he shook his head.

"Only what?" asked Bill.

"Only I don't understand old man Laffin being chief of the Twenty-Third Degree. That isn't right to me."

Inspector Bullott was thoughtfully puffing at his pipe.

"I've been thinking over this murder," he said. "Does it strike you that Brother John may have offended the Ragousas?"

Toby Marsh did not scoff at the idea.

"I don't know," he said, rising; "it's a queer . . . 'Scuse me, folks, I've got an appointment on the right side of the law. Know Jenny Hamshaw? You've missed sump'n' . . . !"

There were two subjects very dear to the heart of Mrs. Caroline Hamshaw. The first of these, the super-excellent qualities of heart and brain in her only child; the second, Murder as a Fine Art.

When she was not extolling the virtues of her daughter and her social triumphs, her generosity, her sweetness of disposition and her amazing exclusiveness, she was supplying her audience with details of crimes which had evidently been objects of intensive study.

It had been Mrs. Hamshaw's fortune as a girl to give evidence in a veritable murder trial, and this experience was probably responsible for the interest she took in crime thereafter.

She had one paying guest, to the presence of whom her high-class daughter offered no objection; for, despite her mother's encomiums, Miss Hamshaw was by nature mean, and had exact ideas about the value of money, and Mr. Toby Marsh paid regularly and never grumbled about extras.

Miss Hamshaw's rigid view on economy was, if the truth be told, the skeleton in her mother's cupboard, and on the evening Bill Holbrook was initiated into the full membership of the Proud Sons of Ragousa, the elder lady, a stout, morose woman with a strong facial resemblance to the late Queen Victoria, sat with her plump hands folded and a tear trickling down her large nose, listening with proper humility to the admonitions of her child.

"I'm not made of money, Mother; and really, I think I'm doing enough for you. I've given you this house—at least, I let you live rent free—and I've spent hundreds on furniture, *and* I'm allowing you three pounds a week."

Mrs. Hamshaw murmured something about the high cost of living, and was snapped to silence.

"I haven't had an engagement this past six months—where do you think I get the money from? Why don't you get another boarder? I suppose, because you see 'La Florette' in big letters on the billboards, you think I'm a millionaire—but salaries are not what they were,

and what with my flat and my car and what not, I have a struggle to make both ends meet."

"I'm sure I do my best to make the money go round," said Mrs. Hamshaw gloomily. "There are times when I wonder whether I wouldn't be better off if I was dead and in my grave."

To which suggestion Florette made no helpful reply.

"Mr. Marsh wouldn't like another boarder," the old woman went on, "and I don't know that I could be bothered. I'm not so young as I was. When I was a girl in Bath working for the Carens—him that murdered his wife, and——"

"Don't give us any horrors," begged Florette, well acquainted with her mother's weakness. "I know all about Caren."

"The child went to the workhouse, and a doctor adopted her—Dr.—now, what was his name? He called her Carew—Laffin, that was it!—What's wrong, my love?"

La Florette was staring at her mother.

"Carew—what was her first name?"

"Elizabeth; a pretty little thing with red hair. It's a funny thing about her, that she wasn't Caren's child at all. I knew everything about it. . . ."

The girl was listening, open-mouthed.

"A middle-aged man, Mr. Leiff Something—I remember the 'Leiff' because it was unusual. He married a young girl, and left her with the Carens, when he went back to America . . . he was American. He got ill and couldn't come back, and a week after the baby was born her mother died. Mrs. Caren never had a child, and she got so fond of the little mite that, when Mr. Leiff . . . Stone! That's the name! When he cabled to ask what had happened, Mrs. Caren said that they were both dead, mother and child. She used to cry about the lie she told, and robbing the baby out of a good home. Mr. Leiff What's-his-name . . . Stone, that's it . . . well, he was rich—they say the news turned him crazy——"

La Florette, started up, her eyes blazing.

"Mother, you're not to tell this to anybody in the world, do you hear? Betty Carew has got to stay the daughter of a murderer, and that's what everybody has got to know——"

A gentle cough behind her made her turn her head. Mr. Toby Marsh, hat in hand, stood in the doorway, an apologetic smile on his face.

DR. LAFFIN'S OFFER

"I HOPE," said Mr. Marsh, unconsciously paraphrasing the remarks of a great literary character, "I hope I don't intrude?"

"Come in, Mr. Marsh," said La Florette, reacting instantly to the admiring glance of the newcomer. "My mater and I were having a little pow-wow."

"If it's a family conference—" began Toby, with gentlemanly delicacy.

"No—come in. Mother and I were discussing ways and means. You'll quite understand my position; naturally I don't wish mater to take boarders, not ordinary boarders; I shouldn't like people in my set to know that she took boarders at all."

"Naturally," murmured the lodger.

"But this is what they call in the newspapers the age of—what is the word? It begins with D?"

"Democracy?" suggested Toby correctly.

"That's the word; we've got to do something to keep the wolf from the door. The mater says that you wouldn't like to see another boarder here?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I shouldn't," he said. "Being in the Government service" (this was Toby Marsh's favourite piece of fiction) "a sort of secret service, if you understand, I couldn't afford to have anybody prying and spying around my documents. And another thing, Miss Florette, you can trust me, being a man of discretion, if I may use the expression, but could you

trust some stranger . . . ? I shouldn't like to know that anybody went round saying that he was boarding with the great La Florette's mother."

Florette bit her lip thoughtfully. She was interested in other matters, yet gave the impression of being wholly absorbed in this domestic problem.

"I think you're right, Mr. Marsh," she said at last, with a dazzling smile. "It wouldn't be a good thing. Please think no more about it."

As soon as she could get away from the house she hurried back to Van Campe, her confidant in most matters, though she had decided in the present case to keep her own counsel. Still, he might help.

She got back to the theatre where he had his office, and, opening the door without knocking, walked in—and stopped. Mr. Van Campe had a visitor. A funereal figure rose slowly from the table and turned his dark eyes upon her, and for a second she was nonplussed.

"Why—why, Dr. Laffin!" she stammered. "I didn't expect to find you here."

"I have been talking to Mr. Van Campe," he said, "and, curiously enough, young lady, about your good self."

"About me?"

In her surprise she forgot her tremendous discovery.

"Is zat so?" she lisped, returning to her public rôle of exiled Frenchwoman. "Zat is extraordinaire!"

Laffin was looking at her thoughtfully.

"You may think that the suggestion I have made to Mr. Van Campe is fantastical, bizarre, but I beg that you will not too lightly dismiss the scheme I have put before our friend."

Before she realised that he was on the point of departure, with a little nod he was gone.

"What was he doing here?" she asked, when the door had closed upon the visitor. "And what is this scheme of his?"

"I can't understand that guy," he said. "He came in to see me about getting an engagement for Carew, and

I told him frankly that I was thinking of putting you into the cast—which of course I'm not—and that there wasn't room in the same theatre for you and the girl. I bragged a bit about your Continental reputation, and told him you mixed with the best people in town. In fact, I happened to mention that you dined last night with those two men from the Treasury. And then, before I knew what was happening, he had asked me whether I thought you would help him in a scheme of his."

"A scheme?" she said, frowning. "What is it—a theatrical scheme?"

"No, that's the funny thing about it," said Van Campe, shaking his head. "He wants to take a furnished house in the West End—he suggested Portman Place—put you into it, make you an unlimited allowance, the idea being that you give parties."

"To which he shall be invited, I suppose?" said La Florette sarcastically. "Nothing doing, Campe!"

"No, he didn't even ask that," said Van Campe. "In fact, he told me he would not ask to be received. He said all that he wanted was a little information about the stock market which might come to you."

"He's crazy, if that's all he wants," she said. "I can give him a whole lot of information that I got out of this morning's papers!"

Van Campe was looking thoughtful.

"I didn't like it at first," he said, "but the more I think of it, the bigger opportunity it seems. You are badly in need of boost, and that kind of social boost is the best thing that can come to you. Besides which, there's nothing unusual in his suggestion. I know a family, and a good class family, too, that is supported by a stockbroker for the information they can collect from their parties. Think it over." And then: "What brought you here so late at night?"

She immediately recalled the object of her visit.

"Campe, you know everybody in town—who is Leiff Stone?"

"Leiff Stone? The name seems familiar. There's a

Lambert Stone, an American millionaire who is a friend of De Fell's. But Leiff is a new one on me. Why?"

She was not prepared to enlighten him apparently.

"Couldn't you ask De Fell? He knows the American crowd very well, and if he's a friend of Lambert Stone, he'd get to find out. Maybe it is some relation?"

Van Campe jotted down the name on his blotting-pad, and nodded.

"I'll see him in the morning," he said; "and now, if you don't mind, I've got an hour's work to do before I can leave this darned office. I've had the police here all day, making inquiries about that street murder."

"Here?" she said, in amazement.

"Yes; it appears that the murdered man called at the stage door this morning to see Carew, and found her. She'd come to the theatre for her make-up box. I was telling Laffin about it, but that didn't mean anything to him. I guess he wouldn't really worry if the girl was pinched."

"I know somebody else who feels exactly the same way," said La Florette grimly.

GONE!

La Florette was hardly out of the house before Toby Marsh had followed her. He saw the lights of her car turn the corner, and regretted that he had not the same form of transportation, for he was in a desperate hurry.

There was no light in Bullott's parlour, but his continuous knocking brought Bill Holbrook, clad sketchily in a dressing-gown and his pyjamas.

"Come right in. Bullott's not at home. What's the hurry? Have they found the murderer? Bullott is a pathetic spectacle—did I tell you that this was his first case?" he asked, as he preceded the visitor up the stairs.

So naturally had events followed one another that it did not seem strange to Bill, even at that moment, that he should be entertaining a notable member of the crimi-

nal classes. Toby Marsh more than interested him. The mysteries of the man were fascinating.

"Who is Betty Carew?" asked Toby, when they had reached the sitting-room, and Bill had turned on the lights and drawn down the window shades.

"Who is Betty Carew?" said the astonished reporter. "The last time I heard of her, she was Betty Carew!"

"You told me to-day that old man Laffin had a hold on her, and I've discovered what it is," said Toby Marsh, speaking rapidly. "She is supposed to be the daughter of a man named Caren, who was executed for the murder of his wife. I didn't know that till to-night."

Bill gaped at him, but Toby did not pause.

"Laffin adopted her when she was a kid, and I'll bet he's never stopped telling her about her grisly past."

"But is it true?"

"I wish you'd known all about it before," said Mr. Marsh regretfully, "and then I'd have created a bigger sensation when I told you it wasn't true! She's the daughter of an American who came to this country, married and was called back home, leaving his wife in the care of Mrs. Caren. The American was taken ill, and, for some reason or other, did not communicate with his young wife until after the baby was born, when he learnt that wife and child had both died. Apparently the woman in whose care she had been left had grown to like the baby, and did not want to be parted from her. That is only the skeleton of the story, but the man's name was Leiff Stone."

Bill leapt up from his chair.

"Leiff? Why, that's Lambert Stone's brother! Then Betty Carew is his niece! Moses!"

"Leiff doesn't mean anything to me, and Lambert means less," said Toby Marsh, but the other interrupted him with a demand for his source of information.

"They say that listeners hear no good of themselves," began Toby, "which may or may not be true. They certainly hear a whole lot that's bad about other people; and though eavesdropping is repugnant to me——"

Presently Bill had the story as far as his informant could tell him.

"Wait here. We'll go round and see Stone right away," he said, and dashed off to his room to dress.

He returned in a miraculously short space of time.

They found Lambert Stone, who had just returned from the theatre, and in a few brief words Bill told him all that they had learnt.

"It sounds true," he said. "All the circumstances fit. I know Leiff did marry a girl here, and that he came back to America at about the time of his daughter's birth. I also know that he left her in Bath."

"Was he ill in America?" asked Bill, and Stone nodded.

"It happened at sea," he said. "The ship ran into a gale, and Leiff was thrown down a companionway on to his head; there was a bad concussion, and practically he did not regain consciousness until after he arrived in New York, and then his condition was so serious that we thought he had lost his mind. It was six months before he became normal. He never told me the name of the people with whom he left his wife, but I know that a letter came saying that she was dead, and I can well remember the terrible time we had. I've hated myself ever since, because it was I who brought him to England, and through my instrumentality that he was introduced to the woman, who eventually became his wife. Betty Carew! Why, I met her only to-day! The story is true—I feel it. And verification is fairly easy; she would have been registered in her father's name within a few days of her birth, before Mrs. Caren could have ever dreamt of her scheme of deception. Poor soul! Do you know where my—my niece lives?"

Bill nodded.

"I must see her to-night."

It was near midnight when they stopped before the house where Betty lived, and Bill rang the bell, expecting that it would be some time before he received an answer. To his surprise, the landlady opened the door almost immediately.

"Is that Miss Carew?" she asked, peering out into the dark.

A premonition of danger quickened the reporter's pulse.

"Isn't she at home?" he asked.

"No, sir. I can't understand it. I came home about half an hour ago, and found the table in the hall broke—look!" She pointed to the wreckage of a small table. "Miss Carew's room was empty. She'd been to bed, too."

Bill flew up the stairs, and into the room, which instinct told him was the girl's. The bedclothes were thrown on the floor, and here too a small table had been overturned. There was no other sign of a struggle.

"Perhaps somebody came for her?" suggested the landlady.

"I think they did," said Bill, speaking slowly.

He looked round at the serious face of Lambert Stone.

"What do you think?" asked the American in a low voice.

"I think the mystery of the desk-selling campaign and the locked room on the top floor of Laffin's house, has been continued for yet another chapter," he said.

THE DREAM

DESPITE all the precautions that Bill had taken, Betty Carew had been interviewed twice by the police that afternoon—interviews which, however, were completely unsatisfactory as she had not seen Brother John before, and (in response to an urgent note that had come to her from Bill when he discovered that he could not prevent a police visit) she had said nothing about Laffin or the message.

In the evening Clive Lowbridge called for her with his big car, and drove her into the country.

Clive was remarkably taciturn during the trip, and she was not sorry, though she found herself ruminating

scream died in her throat, and then she slept dreamlessly.

Her room was still pitch dark when she came to consciousness, but the bed was bigger—wider than her own. Putting out her hand toward the table where the candle was, she found nothing.

"I'm still dreaming," she murmured, and lay for a long time debating whether she should make an effort to wake or continue her sleep.

By the time she had decided, she was sitting in a high-backed chair, looking stupidly from left to right.

She was in a chapel, high-roofed, dimly lit. Facing her was a white altar. Two large candles glowed in golden sconces, and that, it seemed, was all the light there was.

Flanking the altar were two lines of stalls, massively carved, and above each stall was a banner, heavily embroidered with gold. She caught the dull glitter of the bullion in the faint golden light of the candle, and saw that the stalls were occupied. In each there sat a black cowled figure, motionless but not silent.

She looked down; she was dressed in white—her feet were bare, and across her knees was a crimson stole.

The cowled figures were chanting something, a drone of sound that seemed to be tuneless, until she remembered. Years before she had attended a recital of old English music, and had heard a quaint dirge that the lecturer had told her was the Song of Triumph, composed in honour of Henry's victory at Agincourt. It was that they were singing . . . the words were indistinguishable.

"O revealed!"

Midway between her and the altar was a man in a long violet gown, his head and face covered, as were the others, by a hood. But she knew the voice, could have sworn to it—the voice of the old man who had come to her at the store. The Man of the Message!

"Into your hands I deliver The Law, divine Messenger of the Absolute! Write, that the law shall be complete and the gap of the circle filled!"

She heard a murmur by her side, and turned her throbbing head. Left and right of her stood two black-gowned men.

Something heavy was laid on her knees. It was a thick brown book, and instinctively she grasped it. Why, she did not know. Perhaps it was slipping from her.

"Hold it . . . hold it to your breast!" hissed a voice in her ear, and mechanically she obeyed.

The cowled men were filing out. She heard the swish and shuffle of sandals on the stone floor and the deep-throated discordances of the ancient hymn . . . And now she was alone—alone save for the two cowled figures.

"Rise!" The order came sharply.

They took her by the arm, and slowly paced by her side. Through a narrow doorway, along a cold passage. Rattle and clang of bars and bolts, and another door opened.

They were in the open . . . the fresh night winds played against her cheek.

"I want to wake up!" she cried wildly, and remembered no more.

When she opened her eyes the first thing she saw was the drawn face of Bill Holbrook. He was standing at the foot of her bed, and she noticed that his waistcoat was buttoned in the wrong holes, giving him a grotesquely lopsided appearance.

"Oh, you're in it, too, are you?" she asked faintly. "But you mustn't kiss me. I don't like people kissing me, Mr. Holbrook!"

A second man was bending over her, a grey-haired man who wore large horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Headache?" he asked.

"A little—not much. Where am I now?"

"You're in hospital now," he said. "Do you feel strong enough to tell us how you got to Clapham Common in the middle of last night?"

She opened her eyes wide. She was awake—her mind was very clear.

"What day is it?"

"Thursday," was the reply.

It was on Tuesday night that she had gone to bed!

BETTY DOES NOT REMEMBER

It was not till a day later that Betty learnt of the extraordinary circumstances under which she was found. A police patrol, who crossed Clapham Common just before daybreak, saw a figure stretched on the grass, and, thinking it was a sleeping vagrant, stepped over the low rails that separated the path from the grass-land, and walked toward it, flashing his lamp upon what appeared to be a big bundle of rugs.

Not the least remarkable feature of the discovery was that, not only was the girl, as it proved to be, swathed in blankets and lying upon a hospital stretcher, but in order to ensure her safety, the rugs enclosed rubber water bottles, which were still hot when she was found. The policeman had called up an ambulance, and Betty had been transferred to the nearest hospital.

"I suppose my disappearance is in all the papers?" she said ruefully. "I am beginning to suspect you of an intensive publicity campaign, Mr. Holbrook!"

"That isn't the kind of publicity you'd get from me, Miss Carew," he said quietly. "You are sure you remember nothing?"

"No, nothing." She was emphatic on that point. "I had some queer dreams, but I remember nothing after lying down in my bed, until I woke yesterday in the hospital."

This time Bullott was present at the interview.

"Did you drink anything before you lay down?" he asked.

"Some milk," she said. "My landlady generally leaves me a glass in the hall."

"That, of course, could have been got at if the people were waiting for you in the house, as I suspect they were."

He had found that the landlady was got out of the

way by the simple process of sending her a reserved stall for the Lyceum. A messenger boy had brought it in that afternoon.

"Does Dr. Laffin know?" she asked quickly.

"He has been told, but he is not very much interested," said Bill. "He said that he thought you would turn up sooner or later."

"Mr. Holbrook," she said, just before he went, "was I dreaming last night, or did Mr. Lambert Stone see me?"

"You weren't dreaming this time. And, Miss Carew, you're going to tell me something about those dreams of yours, aren't you, when you're well enough?"

"I'll try; they were extraordinary. I don't even know now whether they were real or imaginary."

"If there was any about my kissing you," said William Holbrook coldly, "you can put that down to imagination right away," and grinned to see her flush. "No, it was Lambert Stone you saw all right. He's got some news for you when he comes to see you this evening."

"For me?" she said in surprise. "What kind of news?"

"Well—" awkwardly—"it's pretty good for you, that's all!"

"This," said Bullott, when they walked out through the shady grounds of the hospital, "is the craziest crime that has ever been committed. The girl is unharmed; she has obviously been kept under the influence of drugs; the doctor suggests scopolamin, which would keep her in a state of coma for two days, provided she were kept in the dark; and when she is found, she is wearing a white silk robe over her nightdress—a robe which her landlady has never seen before, and which I don't suppose Miss Carew would recognise if she saw it. Another point; when she is picked up by the officer, she is lying on a stretcher—an ordinary Army stretcher that you can buy at any war depôt for a pound. That means that she has been wherever she has been in an ambulance, or some car that was originally used as an ambulance. I've had all the hire depôts investigated, and I've had reports from the country constabulary around London, but no

ambulance has been reported, which cannot be accounted for, though, if it carried no distinguishing marks, and travelled in the night, I should not expect a report."

"Do you mean to suggest that she was two days and two nights unconscious?" asked Bill incredulously.

"From her point of view, yes," said Bullott. "If you were to see a person under its influence you would not imagine that he or she was drugged. Its effect is to destroy the recollection of what passed a few seconds before, and our only hope is that there were moments when the effects of the dope wore off and she can recall to us some incident which will put us on the track. What does this bird wish?"

" 'This bird' was a shabby man who had been waiting for them on the street outside, and now moved as though to intercept them. The face was that of a weakling; his irregular features, the small, unshaven chin, the furtive look in his small, pale eyes, said to Holbrook, something of a physiognomist, 'criminal.' To Mr. Bullott, with his amazing memory for faces, it said two words.

"Well, Tinker, how long have you been out?"

Tinker's jaw dropped.

"Tinker Lane," introduced Bullott with embarrassing frankness, "a ladder larcenist between voyages, eh, Tinker? He's called Tinker because he's a sailor—that is a peculiar form of English humour which will not appeal to you, Holbrook. What do you want?"

"I don't want nothing from you, sir," whined the man, recognising authority in the inspector's tone. "I wanted to see this gent. Somebody told me he was a reporter."

"Me?" said Bill in surprise.

Bullott drew off discreetly, leaving them alone.

"Excuse me, sir,"—the man's hoarse confidence was flavoured with a strong smell of liquor—"but when I was on a voyage to Orstralia, there was a fellow serving with me who told me he got a lot of money out of newspapers by telling 'em something about a sea serpent that he'd seen with his own eyes——"

"If you're trying to tell me a sea serpent story, you're letting all that good vinous breath run to waste," said Bill, good-humouredly.

"No, sir, it ain't that."

Bill was looking at him curiously. He wore a pair of corduroy trousers, a ragged blue jersey up to his neck, and the greasy cap on his head had once adorned the head of a ship's officer.

"I've got a story that's worth pots of money!" said Tinker. "I'll bet it's worth thousands!"

With elaborate caution he looked round to see if he was observed, and then, diving deep into his trousers pocket, he produced a little green and gold star, with an inscription in the centre, which Bill saw was in Greek, though he was insufficiently acquainted with that ancient tongue to translate or even read it.

"Five points," said Tinker Lane impressively. "Pain, Sorrow" he ticked them off with a grimy forefinger—"Hunger, Thirst and Death. How's that?"

"Sounds pretty good to me," said Bill. "What is it supposed to be? A patent medicine ad.?"

"No, it ain't, it's a story."

For the third time he looked nervously around.

"What did they ask me to come in for—me, that never had any education and never wanted it; me that has been in bird——"

" 'Bird'?" said the puzzled William.

"Quod—you know, prison—over the Alps—anything you like. I've been in four times. You wouldn't think they'd want a man like me, would you? As a matter of fact, I didn't understand what they were jabbering about. It made me laugh to hear this big guy in a black cloak talking about duty and responsibility and all that hunk. But I had to go through with the first degree, and when it was over they come for me—tapped me on the shoulder as I was going out of the lodge."

"The Proud Sons of Ragousa?" gasped Bill.

"Got it first time. The fellow that tapped me was an old shipmate of mine, a chap that got five years in Singa-

pore for knifing the mate of a ship he was sailing with. He told me they picked him up in the East India Dock Road when he was down and out."

Bill turned and beckoned Bullott to him.

"Listen to this," he said. "Our friend is telling me a little story about the Proud Sons that will make your ears prick!"

"I haven't given you the story yet. You've only got the beginning of it," the dilapidated Tinker made haste to assure them.

"Wait," said Bill, and told his friend what had already passed between them.

"When this man tapped you on the shoulder—this old shipmate of yours—what did he want you to do?"

"I didn't know it was him, to tell you the truth. He had one of those bed-gowns on. But he told me to wait for him outside, and we went off to the White Hart to have a drink, and he spilled the rest of the yarn. He said they'd picked him up in the East India Dock Road, down and out, took him up to the lodge and made him a member—the Limehouse Lodge, Number—well, I don't know what the number is, anyway, it was Limehouse. The biggest lodge in London. After that they made him into the Twenty-Third Degree. That's what I am—the Twenty-Third Degree," he said impressively. "You'd never guess it, would you? But I am; I can go down to any of these Ragousa fellows and make 'em do what I like—in a sense! I couldn't make 'em give me money without putting 'em out: I know that because I've tried. But it's one of the swell lodges."

"You're a member of the Twenty-Third Degree, and that star——"

"Ah! That star!" said the other, with grinning triumph. "That's what I'm going to tell you about. What's going to be done in July—the twenty-ninth of July? Do you know what I am?" He pointed to himself. "I'm second engine-room guard. It's worth ten thousand quid to me. You wouldn't believe it—ten thousand quid, and I haven't got the price of a doss!"

"In that case," said Bill, "it doesn't seem that it's worth while your telling the story for a few paltry pounds."

"Ten thousand wouldn't buy my neck: I love myself too much. Besides, how do you know they're not going to double-cross me? It would be the easiest thing in the world. I know something better. You slip me five hundred of the brightest and best, and I'll give you a story that'll make your hair stand on end, and all your newspaper readers go blue with fright. You think I am bluffing, but I'm not. It's the bird in the hand I want, and I've been following you about London all day trying to get a word with you, though I didn't know this gentleman was a busy, or may be I wouldn't have come up and talked to you now. I can get a ship next week for the River Plate, and with five hundred in my pocket I could have a peach of a time in Buenos Aires. Do I get the money?"

Bill thought a while quickly.

"I can't give you the money myself, but I'll speak to my editor," he said. "Will you come to my house to-night at nine o'clock?"

The man accepted the offer eagerly.

"Make it ten," he said. "I've got to meet my friend at nine. And have the money ready—this is a sensation! And say—why ship flour to America? And canned meat to America, and rifles and booze—openly? That's funny, ain't it? So long!"

And with no other word of explanation he slouched off.

Inspector Bullott knew much more about the Proud Sons of Ragousa than Bill Holbrook imagined. It was not for amusement that he had spent half the previous night in the newly furnished house of one who, by an act of fortune, had suddenly found himself a comparatively rich man. But Bullott's craving for information was insatiable.

There was a Government department which dealt with "friendly societies," and he made a call on the chief of

the bureau, to discover that he might have saved himself a journey.

"The Ragousas do not come under my observation," said the official. "We deal solely with benefit societies, that is to say, with societies the members of which pay a certain sum a week and receive sick pay, insurance and similar benefits. The Ragousas come into the category of social clubs, and make no returns of their membership."

"All that I know of them is that they are a perfectly innocuous association with an extremely large membership. There has been a suggestion that their method of dispensing big prizes comes under the Lottery Act, but you, as a police officer, will know more about that than I. As a matter of fact," he confessed, "quite a number of men I know are members, and they are eminently respectable persons. You will never eradicate from human nature the desire to dress up."

There was little in this unsatisfactory interview to add to the sum of Bullott's knowledge. More interesting were the confidential reports which he was receiving from the coast towns. Some of these were a little disquieting.

"I cannot understand what has come over the Ragousas lately," wrote the Chief Constable of Northport. "They seem to be gathering the worst elements in the town; and if they had somebody recruiting members at the prison door, I should not be surprised. I have had one or two complaints from men who have been members of the order for years, and who say that the class of membership is falling very considerably. I knew at least three new Ragousas who have convictions behind them, and one of these is a man who has been twice tried for attempted murder."

Bullot filed the report and read another, similarly couched. The Tinker, then, was not the only hard case recently initiated into the mysteries of the Proud Sons.

Later in the evening he made another call at the hospital. The girl was up and anxious to return to her lodgings.

"I'm going to ask you a question, Miss Carew, and I'd like you to give a lot of thought before you reply. You have some confused recollection of what happened to you after you were taken from your house?"

"Very confused," she smiled, "so confused that even now I am perfectly certain I saw you and Mr. Holbrook."

"Did you by any chance see Dr. Laffin, or hear his voice?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No, I have no recollection whatever, though one of the voices I heard was familiar. Do you think Dr. Laffin was responsible?"

"I wouldn't like to mention any names," said the diplomatic Bullott.

"I don't remember." She shook her head again. "I certainly have no impression of the doctor. The only thing I am certain about is that I was on a stretcher. I was found lying on a stretcher, wasn't I? Well, I must have been on that most of the time. I have a distinct recollection of my bed sagging in the middle, and I'm sure I must have been in a car, for I remember distinctly the buzzing and vibration, and somebody saying that we had lost the way." She laughed softly. "Perhaps Mr. Holbrook was not in it, but that part of my dream was very vivid."

"About his kissing you?" asked the unemotional Bullott, and she gasped and went red.

"How did you know?" she demanded.

"You mentioned something about his kissing you when you woke up."

"If you ever discuss this with Mr. Holbrook, I wish you would emphasise the fact that the experience from beginning to end was a nightmare. Please remember to say that."

Bullott smiled to himself as he went out. That little conversation would bear repeating, he thought, but unfortunately, when he reached his house Bill Holbrook was out.

A TALK WITH DR. LAFFIN

Bill had not seen Laffin since the night the doctor had lost his golden buckle. He had very wisely left the police to interview him concerning Betty Carew's strange disappearance, with what was, to a reporter, the utterly unsatisfactory result of exonerating that gentleman from any complicity in her abduction.

When he arrived at Camden Road, the door was opened to him by a strange servant—strange also to the doctor, it would seem, for she hesitated when, as Bill suspected, she should have told him that Dr. Laffin was not to be seen.

"Come in, sir," she said, closing the door behind him. "If you'll sit down in the hall for a minute, I'll find out whether the doctor will see you."

There came from the study the sound of voices raised in altercation, and she had to knock twice before a sharp voice bade her come in. She heard the doctor's smothered exclamation of annoyance, heard his snarl and the flow of cold-blooded vituperation at the mistake which the unfortunate servant had called forth. Then a man came out of the room, flushed and angry, but with a ready smile for Bill.

"You're Holbrook, aren't you? I'm Lord Lowbridge. I think we've met before. Are you seeing this old devil to find out his responsibility for the outrageous treatment of Miss Carew? You can save yourself a lot of trouble; I've been trying for the past hour. Nevertheless, he's in it up to his neck," he said, lowering his voice, and then, seeing the frightened servant in the doorway, he nodded and went out.

Whatever fury Bill's arrival had evoked in the bosom of Dr. Laffin, all trace of emotion had vanished when the visitor stumbled into the dark room and groped his way towards a chair which he would never have known was there to receive him, but for a gleam of light upon its polished back.

"I understand that you wish to see me, Mr. Holbrook?" The doctor was his old, mincing self, soft-voiced, superior, imperturbable. "It is fair that you should know that I have little sympathy with the methods of the modern Pressman. Even the highest and the most intellectual newspapers in the land seem to have adopted the objectionable hustle of the cheaper Press. Fortunately, newspapers are not necessary to me, and publicity is my bête noir."

"Thank you for those encouraging words," said Bill cheerfully, "but I haven't come to interview you about Miss Carew's disappearance. I understand the police have already seen you, and that you knew nothing whatever of the matter until you were informed?"

"Miss Carew and I are not on terms of confidence." The doctor put his long finger-tips together, and was leaning back in his chair, looking down at the table. "The opportunities which I have offered to her have been so often flouted, my authority so continuously despised, my charity—for I have been charitable—so ungraciously rewarded, that I have almost ceased to take an interest in her future."

"By charity, I presume you mean your adoption of her when she was a baby? I've been wondering, Doctor," said Bill quietly, "whether you knew, when you took that child from the poorhouse, that her father was Lieff Stone——"

The doctor's hands were palm to palm beneath his chin. He was ridiculously like some mediæval saint in the act of devotion. But at Bill Holbrook's words, both hands dropped with a thud upon the table, and the hard, black eyes met his.

"What do you mean?" he said harshly.

"You didn't know, then, that the Carens were not the parents of the girl who calls herself Elizabeth Carew? That she was the daughter of Leiff Stone, who left his wife in the care of the Carens when he returned to America?"

"It seems almost like an extract from some popular

work of fiction," said Dr. Laffin at last. "When did you learn this?"

Holbrook told him, in a few words, without, however, revealing Toby Marsh as the source of the information.

"I confess that I did not trouble to search the register," said Laffin, after a pause. "You say that Mr. Lambert Stone is perfectly satisfied that the girl is his niece, and that Mr. Leiff Stone was her father?"

"'Was'?" repeated Bill sharply. "Is he dead?"

"How am I to know, if I do not number this gentleman amongst my acquaintances?" he said smoothly. "'Was' or 'is'—does it matter? All things are, for the spirit essence is indestructible."

"We will keep away from the occult, if you don't mind, doctor," begged Holbrook. "I am a little out of my depths when I lift my mind from the Camden Road, and the is-ness of things."

The doctor rose.

"Thank you for coming, Mr.—er—Holbrook, I think your name is? I must write to my little Elizabeth and congratulate her. She will, I have no doubt, remember with gratitude the care that I lavished upon her."

"I guess she won't have much chance of forgetting," said Bill coolly. "But that wasn't all I came to see you about, Doctor. Your Twenty-Third Degree has got me guessing."

Laffin raised his hand in protest, and in so doing made the almost imperceptible sign of the Ragousas.

"That doesn't mean anything to me," said the calm Bill, "and if you're going to pull any of that stuff about the oath of the Proud Sons and the responsibilities of brotherhood, I shall say things to you which I may regret. What is this Twenty-Third Degree? How do you come to be the head of it? I'm asking you"—he spoke slowly, leaning over the table, his palms on its edge, his face within a few inches of the doctor's—"because there's something behind the Ragousas, something you know, something that is sinister and outside of the law. The Ragousas are decent men, with decent men's childish

delight in passwords and signs and grips, and the fool play that is part of the joy of secret societies. But the Twenty-Third Degree doesn't belong to the plumbers and bakers and icemen who get thrilled every time they mask their faces and think they're being conspirators. How came you there, right on top?"

"The Twenty-Third Degree," began the doctor, "as you ought to know as a Ragousa—I dislike most intensely discussing the mysteries of that noble order—has ever been a degree of honour——"

"Forget it," said Bill. "The Twenty-Third Degree was moribund until you went into it. It consisted of about fifty ancients who dabbled in occultism, acting as a buffer between the lower degrees and the swell fellows on top, the Priors. But those old guys are out of the Twenty-Third; they've been returned, one by one, to their various lodges, and other men have taken their places—men you've selected yourself. What's the idea, Laffin?"

Dr. Laffin's lips tightened.

"I refuse, utterly refuse, to discuss the secrets of the Ragousas," he said. "If you were not entirely lost to shame, to all sense of decency, you would not press such an indelicate question upon one who has the honour——"

"Leiff Stone—where is he?"

Laffin's eyes blinked at his questioner, but he did not answer.

"Where is Leiff Stone?" asked Bill Holbrook slowly and deliberately. "The man who called at the store in Duke Street, the man in the black cassock and the sandals, who came to Betty Carew and asked for 'the message'? The man who expected to see her there, sitting in a green dress at a desk on which was a jade vase and one red rose? Where is Leiff Stone?"

"I don't know, I don't understand you. You're mad to ask such questions," he said, and for the first time since Bill had known him there was a tremor of anxiety in his voice. "And if I knew I would not tell you. How dare you come to me—to me, of all people in the world? You shallow-brained, material——"

"Rough talk doesn't worry me," said Bill. "I'm acquainted with a news editor who can give you a pretty long start in the matter of offensive invention. Now I'm going to tell you something." He tapped with his knuckles on the desk to emphasize every word. "Leiff Stone is, or was, the Grand Prior of the Ragousas."

Dr. Laffin walked across to the door and opened it slowly.

"Good-night," he said, with extravagant politeness. "I have thoroughly enjoyed our conversation."

Bill nodded. There was nothing more to be said, no profit in any further interview. He walked out into Camden Road with a sense of triumph.

He drove to the Press Club, for he had a column to write on the latest developments of the Brother John murder, and it was nearly eleven o'clock before he joined Lambert Stone. Mr. Stone had spent the greater part of the evening at the hospital, for, although Betty had recovered, the doctors had thought it wise to detain her for another day.

"You told her about your relationship?"

"Yes, she was dazed, but pathetically glad," said Stone. "I don't think she quite realized how her supposed parentage has clouded her life. She told me that Laffin never ceased to taunt her with the fact that she had a murderer's blood in her veins."

"What difference will it make to her position? Your brother is a rich man?"

"I don't know," smiled Stone. "He was very rich once; our father left us each two million dollars, and probably Leiff is still a wealthy man. But that doesn't matter very much, does it? I'm a bachelor; Betty is my only relative."

Bill scratched his chin.

"I see," he said, without enthusiasm. "Miss Carew—I'll still call her that, if you don't mind—goes into the desirable heiress class?"

"With a lordly lover ready made," laughed Stone. "The first person she asked for was Clive Lowbridge."

"Indeed?" said Bill coldly. "Isn't that grand?"

Stone was eyeing him keenly.

"You don't like Lowbridge?"

"On the contrary, I like him very much." Holbrook roused himself with an effort to cheerfulness. "Oh no, I've nothing on Lowbridge, only—somehow—I don't like these international marriages."

He was astonished at himself; his voice was husky, he had a queer sensation of pain, for which he could find no adequate cause.

"I'll be getting along," he said, after an awkward pause. "I'm glad you told her. She's rather . . . sweet, that niece of yours."

He walked down the stairs, passed the night porter with a nod, and stepped out into the cool night air, curiously shaken. As he stood, a little numb with the realisation of his folly, a car came slowly past. He looked at it dully, seeing yet not seeing. Then, from the place where the driver sat, leapt a red pencil of flame, and Bill Holbrook crumpled in a heap on the sidewalk.

RAGOUSA TALK

LAMBERT STONE was halfway down the stairs with Holbrook's coat on his arm, when he heard the shot. The night porter had also heard the *plock!* of a pistol fired with a silencer, and reached the huddled figure before Stone came running up. Together they lifted the unconscious reporter and carried him into the elevator.

" 'Phone a doctor," said Stone quickly, when they had laid him on the sofa in his sitting-room.

The bullet had struck above Bill Holbrook's right eyebrow, and followed the eccentric course which bullets sometimes take, for it had emerged from the skin at a point above the ear, having completed a half-circuit of his head, without, so far as Stone could discover, penetrating the bone at any place. The wound was ugly enough, and the night porter had no doubt that the victim was dead, but Lambert Stone, who had passed his youth in a community where gun-play was a normal circum-

stance of life, diagnosed the injury with greater accuracy.

Fortunately, there was a doctor in the building, and his brief examination confirmed Lambert's view.

"There is no fracture," he said, busy with his needle, "and the longer this young man remains unconscious, the easier it will be to fix him."

The dressing of the wound was nearly completed, when Bill opened his eyes and stared up into the face of his host.

"Nearly got me, I guess," he said faintly.

"You didn't see the shooter?"

"No . . . same as Brother John . . . got me from the car."

Save for a racking headache, he was his normal self when Bullott came.

"I called at Laffin's on my way," he said. "He hasn't left the house all evening—I know this because I've got a shadow watching him. You were there to-night—you told him something?" he challenged.

"Yuh," said Bill.

"What was it—Ragousa talk?" asked Bullott, with a pretence at carelessness.

"Twenty-Third Degree, mostly. Why I did it, I don't know; I should have been kicked—it was my weakness for sensation made me so darned talkative. I know why I was shot all right. What's the time?"

"A quarter to twelve."

"I've got to see that man," he said. "I can go, can't I, Doctor?"

"Unless it is very important," hesitated the doctor, "I don't think you should be moved."

"It *is* important," said Bill emphatically, and sat up with a groan.

It was only when he swore that he would go to bed the moment he arrived home, and that he would get a nurse and a surgeon on the following morning to dress the wound, that the doctor agreed.

Midnight was chiming from a church clock when Bullott and Lambert Stone helped him out of the cab, and

up to his room. A man was standing in the shadow of the doorway; Bill saw him the moment he reached the sidewalk; but it was not the Tinker.

"Got you, did they?" said a cheerful voice. "I somehow thought they'd go gunning for you when I heard you spilling your trouble to the doctor."

It was Toby Marsh, and Bill stared at him incredulously.

"You heard? You weren't in the doctor's study."

"I'm there every night," said Toby Marsh, with a smirk. "You couldn't keep me away from Laffin; we're like brothers!"

Toby sat on the edge of the bed, the stub of an unlighted cigar between his white teeth.

"I ought to have been a reporter," he said. "I've got more newsgetting ideas than any of the cubs I've met in my professional life. Lord! when I think of the scoops I could have got," he said reminiscently. "I'll tell you something, Bullott, as a guarantee of good faith, as the newspapers say. I did a two years' course of deed-box work. That's a new one on you? In that two years I broke into a hundred and twenty-three lawyers' offices. It was a hobby, you understand; just an in-something-able curiosity—what's the word? Thank you—insatiable. There's no money in lawyers, but a whole fortune if I'd been 'putting the black'.- I did other work, because a man's got to live, and hobbies are expensive. But the documents I've read! The bundles of letters, tied up with red tape, what wives have said to their husbands and what husbands have said to their wives, the confessions and deeds of assignment—there's a Cabinet Minister who's been paying three thousand a year blackmail for the last twelve years; did you know it?" He mentioned a great name. "I'm a reporter, I tell you—I want to know. A lot of people think that a born reporter is a fellow who wants to write, but that's not so, and Holbrook will tell you the same. A born reporter just wants

* Blackmail.

to know, and he doesn't care a darn whether he writes or whether he doesn't."

"I'll swear you were not in that room," said Bill vigorously. "It was fairly dark, but you couldn't have been concealed——"

"I wasn't within a mile of that room," confessed Toby. "Nevertheless, I was there, if you understand, in the spirit."

He was intensely amused, convulsed with internal laughter. Presently he took off his gold-rimmed spectacles and wiped them dry.

"When the weather goes cold, I'm finished as a source of information. But, barring this accident, I'm your special correspondent at headquarters."

"You'd make a lot of money if you went straight," said Bullott with reluctant admiration.

Toby Marsh's nose wrinkled.

"You're talking like a judge. 'If your energies had been directed into proper and legitimate channels, you might have made an honest living, instead of which you are going down for nine moons with hard labour.' No, sir, burglary is my long suit, and all the rest are recreations. I'd sooner open a burglar-proof safe, or burn out a fire-resisting lock, than I'd see my name over the finest story that was ever printed."

"You're a bad man, and will come to a bad end," said Bullott.

"I shall end up as a churchwarden," said the other calmly, "highly respected by the folk of a cathedral city, and admired by my neighbors. Maybe I'll take dinner with a bishop every other Thursday—you never can tell. Or perhaps I'll get a knighthood. The Prime Minister's daughter will get locked up in a safe, and nobody can open it; somebody thinks of Toby Marsh; he arrives in the nick of time and saves the daughter amid loud applause. I saw a play like that. I have my dreams."

Bill glanced at Bullott, who looked at his watch.

"You can save yourself a lot of trouble—he won't come."

"Who?" asked the startled inspector.

"Tinker," was the reply, "the gentleman who was calling to spill the beans. I've been looking for him all night, and if I can't find him, there isn't a busy that ever strolled out of Scotland Yard disguised as a gentleman who could succeed. I've searched every dive from the Edgware Road to Whitfield Street. I've asked the nearest approach he's got to a friend. I've been to his lodgings in Seven Dials—where all the coon-jazzers live—and there's no sign or sight of him—hasn't been seen since four o'clock this afternoon, when he had a cup of tea at Bony's coffee-shop. Is it likely he'll come?"

As though in answer to his question, came one heavy knock at the street door, and Bullott went down the stairs two at a time.

A shabby looking man stood on the doorstep, but it was not the Tinker.

"Name of Bullott?" he asked hoarsely.

"That's my name." The detective took a letter from the man's hand. "Here, wait!" he called, as the messenger was making a rapid retreat, but he took no notice of Bullott's instructions.

The letter contained one word—"Detained." No signature, date, place or address. He went out into the street, but by this time the man who had brought the note was running, and it seemed that no useful purpose could be served by bringing him back.

"What do you think of this?" he asked, returning to his party. "Take it by the edge; I'm going to bring out the finger-prints."

Bill took the note from his hand, and read the word.

"I suppose there's no doubt that this is from the Tinker?"

" 'Detained' is a word that the Tinker wouldn't use," said the irrepressible Marsh. "It doesn't belong to the three thousand six hundred and twelve words that make up the lowbrow's vocabulary. If you think the number is less, take any page in a dictionary and count the words that everybody knows."

"That isn't the Tinker's writing, anyway—for the simple reason that he can't write," said Bullott, looking at the letter again.

He went downstairs and returned with a small phial half-filled with a fine violet powder, and shook a little on to the paper. This he worked round dexterously until the notepaper was covered with a violet film of dust. When he blew the residue into the fireplace, a thumb-print was visible in one corner.

"And that's yours," grunted Bullott, nodding at Bill. "The man who wrote this wore gloves."

He treated the envelope in the same way, and here, as he expected, the prints were many, and, to his practised eye, the majority of them were thumbmarks made by the same individual.

"We may be able to trace the messenger, but the writer has left no sign."

Bill sat up in bed, and reached for the cigarette box.

"The twenty-ninth of July, things are going to happen. That date intrigues me. And what did he mean by saying that somebody was shipping canned beef and flour to America—and rifles, too, if I remember rightly? Bullott, I'm keeping that appointment on Sunday night, and I'm going alone."

"In which case you'll return in company," interrupted Toby promptly. "There'll be an ambulance man, two doctors, a bunch of policemen, and may be the mortuary keeper. You're referring to your appointment on the Epping Road . . . third milestone, if I remember? I thought so! Son, I admire your courage, but your intelligence is beneath contempt. There's only one place for you in the course of the next week or two, and that is behind a steel wall, eating food that you've prepared yourself."

"Do you really mean that?" asked Bullott seriously.

"You bet I mean it," he said, "you bet I mean it!"

THE SEEN PRIOR

THAT a man should be shot dead in broad daylight, on one of the most crowded streets of London, and that the murderer should have escaped, offered to the leader-writer of every metropolitan newspaper an opportunity and an excuse for calling into question the prescience and genius of the detective force.

The Chief sent for Bullott, and, without a word, handed him a thick bunch of newspaper cuttings, and the first thing that caught the inspector's eye was a paragraph:

> "In the circumstances it is rather remarkable that the officer in charge of the case should be Inspector Bullott, who, we understand, is in this way making his acquaintance with the procedure of criminal detection. Hitherto, Mr. Bullott has occupied an important position in the Records Department of Scotland Yard, where he has rendered admirable service to the State, but which can hardly have fitted him for the duty he is now called upon to perform."

Bullott's heart went down with a thump. The rosy dreams of success, already dim, faded greyly.

"Read the next one," suggested the police chief.

The second of the leaders was even more ruthless.

> "Mr. Bullott, who is in charge of this case, is certainly pursuing methods which are, to say the least, unorthodox. Despising the assistance which trained and efficient police officers, accustomed to such cases, could give to him, he seems to be satisfied with the help of a man of doubtful antecedents and a reporter attached to the staff of one of our contemporaries. Admirable as this combination may appear to the inexperienced Mr. Bullott, an anxious public will not be impressed . . ."

"The third one is almost as bad," said the Chief, and

the troubled Inspector Bullott took up the third cutting reluctantly.

It was from the *Post-News*.

> ". . . frankly, we must ask Scotland Yard to consider seriously whether they are taking all the steps possible to bring to justice this unknown assassin. As frankly, we state that it is, in our opinion, a grave error of judgment to place so important a case in the hands of an inexperienced police officer, a gentleman who has never before handled so much as a minor prosecution . . ."

"I suppose that means you want me to go back to my office, sir?" said Bullott.

The old chief chuckled.

"It means nothing of the kind," he said. "I've been on to the newspapers—I know the editors of most—and I've found that those leaders were written on information supplied yesterday afternoon from a source which they, of course, refuse to reveal. The information was couched in the same terms, all having one object, which is to clear you out of this case. And they wouldn't be worrying about you and your peculiar friends if there wasn't a reason—it is quite enough for me, Bullott, that they wish you replaced. I'll take the unpopular course of confirming you in that appointment. The police force that is popular isn't doing its duty! Now, what about this shooting of Holbrook? How is he, by the way?"

"Practically well," said Bullott. "The Press knows nothing about this last attempt, and I propose to keep it quiet for a day or two."

The chief nodded.

"Marsh may be a difficult proposition for you to handle, but there's nothing new in making use of a man of his questionable past. And he's a character—I wouldn't be surprised if he knew much more about this business than you give him credit for."

The conference lasted an hour, and when Bullott is-

sued into the street the first thing he saw was an early newspaper bill:

"Murder Witness Kidnapped."

Betty's story was now public property. Bill Holbrook's column had been the big news of the morning, and although he had dealt as sketchily as possible with the girl and her experience, he had left no doubt in the reader's mind that her disappearance from London for three days was directly associated with the murder of Brother John.

"Not that I'm sure about that," he said, when Bullott had returned and showed him the paper. "When we can persuade this young lady to tell us her dreams, we shall probably form another opinion—you got a good roasting from the morning papers, Bullott. What do they say at headquarters?"

Bullott turned up his thumbs suggestively.

"The opposition is organised, of course," said Bill, laying down the paper, "and that brings me down to Laffin. There is a Laffin touch in that stuff that can't be mistaken. And, if you want news, here's an item that'll tickle you to death; La Florette has taken Lord Towcester's house in Portman Place for the season, and is entertaining on a large scale, prior to her departure to winter in South America. You don't see anything funny about it? I do! Florette is nearly broke, so is Van Campe. The failure of his last show has brought more creditors to his doorstep than he can accommodate. In fact, Florette—whose other name is Hamshaw—has started economising. Toby Marsh lodges with her mother and knows. A year's rent of that Portman Place house is about two thousand pounds; it will cost five thousand a year to run—and that is without etceteras."

Bullott was only mildly interested.

"That's her trouble," he said.

"And yours too," said Bill, and before he could explain what he meant, Bullott's housekeeper announced a visitor.

It was Mr. Pawter, and in the quiet eyes that gleamed behind his thick, horn-rimmed glasses was a ghoulish satisfaction.

"This comes of leaving the innocent pursuits of commerce, William," he said, glancing approvingly at the white-bandaged head.

"How the devil did you know I was shot up?"

"It has just come on the street, in the later editions," said Mr. Pawter. "That is why I called."

By this time Bullott was halfway down the stairs to his telephone. He had many friends on the Press, and his first call was at the *Evening Gazette*.

"It came through on the tape," said the news editor reproachfully. "You might have tipped us off, Bullott."

"What agency sent it out?" demanded the inspector.

"The Central Association."

Fortunately, Bullott had friends at this court also, but they could give him little satisfaction.

"We had a 'phone call this morning saying Holbrook was shot, and one of our reporters saw the hall-keeper in Albemarle Street, and interviewed the doctor who attended him."

"There's a very busy newsgiver wandering round," he said, when he returned to Bill and told him the result of his investigations.

"It doesn't matter, except to you," said Bill. "I presume the idea of spreading the report is to discredit you still further as a sleuth."

"They can go right on discrediting," said Bullott, with quiet satisfaction. "I don't suppose that it matters. The Chief has given me a new assistant—" he glanced at Mr. Pawter, listening open-mouthed, and decided that it was not a moment for confidences.

"That is Father Pips," explained Holbrook, when his relative had gone. "Pawter's Publicity Agency, my respected cousin, a bachelor, has no criminal tendencies so far as I know, except a passion for gramophone music, and is not even remotely connected with the Proud Sons of Ragousa——"

"That's where you're wrong," said Bullott. "He's the Seen Prior of that exalted order."

"The Seen Prior? What are you talking about?"

"I've been going into this Ragousa question rather thoroughly," said Bullott, "and I have collected more information in the past few days than I ever hoped to get. It is part of the scheme of the Proud Sons that no brother shall know another, though, of course, so far as the lower ranks are concerned, this idea doesn't work, and isn't expected to work. But, higher up, amongst the Grand Lodge folk and the Twenty-Third Degree, and higher still, amongst the Priors of the Order, the system of secrecy is a rigid one. There are fourteen Priors: the Grand Prior, twelve others in residence, and the fourteenth, who comes occasionally and acts for the Grand Prior in certain matters. He's the only man whose face is never covered. That man is Pawter!"

"You're crazy!" said Bill.

"I tell you I'm speaking by the book. I've had a man down in Dartmoor, and we've trailed the Priors to their home. Twelve years ago, an old monastery on the edge of Dartmoor came into the market as a result of a branch of a religious order returning to Italy, where it belonged. The property was purchased on behalf of the Ragousas by Pawter himself. It is a queer, ancient building, surrounded by a high wall in the most desolate part of Dartmoor, and thousands of pounds were spent in renovation before the Grand Priors came into residence. The Priors do not know one another. They live fairly well; each has his own suite, and is waited upon by a lower order Ragousa, specially chosen for the purpose, and well paid for the job. Pawter goes down to the Priory every six months, and when you think the matter over you'll realise the wisdom of having one of the Priors unmasked. Twice a year the lottery occurs, which has made the Proud Sons of Ragousa so popular with the speculating public. The man who does the drawing is Pawter. It is carried out, of course, in the presence of the others, and every precaution is taken to ensure the draw being a fair

one. Hundreds of thousands of metal-rimmed tickets, on each of which is written the official number of a member, are placed in a barrel and turned. The Seen Prior puts his hand through an aperture, takes out a ticket, and that is the first prize-winner. I should not have known this but for the discovery I made last night, that every man who draws a big argosy is present at the next drawing, under a vow of secrecy, of course. I interviewed four of the lucky ones before I could get one to talk, and by an odd chance it happened that he knew Pawter personally, and had worked in his office. Now I'm going to tell you something else; the head of the order is Leiff Stone. My informant told me something I did not know; that there was a Chaplain of the Priors, a short, stout man, whose face naturally he did not see, but whom he heard addressed as 'Brother John'."

Bill whistled.

"Here's a problem for you"—Bullott spoke slowly—"Brother John is the confidant of the Grand Prior, the most trusted member of the order. Why was he shot? I am taking the strongest party of police that ever went to Dartmoor, and raiding the Grand Priory, and when I come out, the murderer of Brother John will be in my hands!"

A STRANGE OCCURRENCE

Clive's flat was indeed a restful spot. At his suggestion, Betty Carew, newly released from hospital, had broken her journey to have tea with him. She lay in a deep armchair, soothed by the greys and blues of the appointments. Benson was setting the tea-table, a capable figure of a man. Clive had gone down to get an evening newspaper with the account of the attack upon Bill Holbrook.

"This is a very peaceful place, Benson."

"Yes, Miss, it is remarkably well situated, and very close to the tubes.

"His lordship finds the flat small," Benson went on, "and I have no doubt it is for a gentleman who would, I

am sure, wish to entertain on a larger scale. If his lordship married, it would be impossible," he added as an afterthought, and she laughed.

"I don't think his lordship contemplates matrimony, does he?"

"I have not his lordship's confidence in the matter," said Benson primly, and at that moment Clive returned.

"Here's the account. Your friend seems to be in the wars."

"He thrives on trouble," she said.

"What were those dreams of yours, Betty? I've got an idea that, when we're able to disentangle reality from the dream, we'll have a pretty good notion of what happened to you."

She dismissed the subject with a weary gesture, and wisely he turned the conversation into more pleasant channels.

"So you're a rich woman now, Betty? That is most embarrassing to me."

"Why to you especially?" She laughed. "I'm not rich. I've discovered some amazing relations, but I don't think it will make a great deal of difference to me. But why are you embarrassed, Clive?"

"Because—I think you know without my telling you. I want to marry you badly, Betty; I wanted to marry you when you were broke and I was broke, and marriage seemed so very, very possible. And then you refused because you thought you would be a drag on me. Now that you are rich, I can't ask you because"—he shrugged his shoulders—"I hate the idea of marrying money."

"Poor Clive! I think the old objection stands. Mr. Lambert Stone is rich, but in all probability my father is a very poor man—and not only poor, but crazy!"

"Craziness is due to an accident which might have happened to you or to me," interrupted Clive.

"I don't offer that as a serious objection," she said. "The question as to whether I am rich or poor really makes no difference at all, Clive. I'm going on with my career—I've told Mr. Lambert Stone as much—and

please don't think that the discovery of long-lost relations means that I'm going to make my home with Mr. Lambert Stone, and that the world is going to witness the meteoric rise of Betty Carew!"

"Betty!" he said in a low voice, "you're going to marry me next week!"

She shook her head.

"You're going to marry me next week," he repeated doggedly. "Nothing in God's world will stop that."

"There is something that will stop it." She had taken a sudden resolve. "I can't marry you."

"Why not?"

She hesitated, summoning all her reserves of courage.

"Because I'm Joshua Laffin's wife—I married him three years ago!"

DOPE

"IT HAPPENED on my seventeenth birthday," she went on in a lifeless voice. "I had discovered something about the doctor; he had been guilty of a most heartless fraud. I was acting as his secretary at the time, and I detected him in the act of forging a document which transferred property to him of an old man who was his patient. I didn't know then why he did it, but he insisted that I should marry him right away. I was terrified, until he had promised me that, if I agreed, he would let me live by myself somewhere. Like a fool, the chance of gaining my liberty at the expense of such a bondage was so alluring that I agreed, and we were married before the registrar. The same day I moved into the rooms which I have occupied off and on ever since."

"He doesn't love you?"

She shook her head.

"He made that clear on the day of our wedding, and he has taunted me many times since that I trapped him into the marriage. The truth was that he feared a criminal prosecution would follow the discovery of the forgery, and he married me to keep my mouth shut, knowing that

a wife may not give evidence against her husband."

Clive Lowbridge sat motionless.

"I never guessed," he said simply.

"Of course, I can divorce him, and I should do that if"—she shrugged her shoulders—"if there were any excuse. But, Clive, he has given me nothing; his life is austere; he has never been really cruel to me—not cruel enough to secure a divorce in England. I'm just shelved until he dies."

"The old devil!" he whispered.

A soft knock on the panel of the door. He turned with a start as Benson came in, carrying a silver tray.

"Mr. William Holbrook is below, sir."

"Here? What does he want?" said Clive in surprise. "Ask him up, Benson, and put another cup for him."

Bill looked white and drawn.

"You been in the wars, too, Holbrook?" asked Clive good-humouredly.

"Somewhat," was the laconic reply. "How do you do, Miss Stone? I didn't expect to find you here."

Her lips twitched at the "Miss Stone."

"You ought to be in hospital."

"I really ought to be in an insane asylum," said Holbrook as he sat down. "Have you seen your respected relative?"

"He hasn't deigned to call upon me," she said, "and I am not very sorry."

Bill grunted something.

"The doctor is—strange," he said aloud, and she felt that he was showing admirable restraint.

Clive was wondering what was the object of the reporter's call, until Bill Holbrook caught his eye, then, taking advantage of Betty's discreet retirement to admire the window-boxes, they walked out of the room.

"I want to put a question to you, Lord Lowbridge. Do you know anything about the Sons of Ragousa?"

"I know something, yes, as much as most people know. It is a friendly society, is it not?"

"Hardly that," said Bill, grimly. "But are you aware

that Laffin holds a very high position in the order?"

"No, that is news to me," said the other frankly. "In fact, it is so incredible that I take leave to doubt——"

"It's a fact," interrupted Bill. "He is the head of the Twenty-Third Degree."

"The news is surprising, and yet not surprising," said Lowbridge, after a pause. "His eccentricities are proverbial. Was it to tell me this that you called?"

"Partly," said Bill, "and partly to ask you whether you saw anything of him the night Miss Carew disappeared?"

Lowbridge shook his head.

"He could not possibly have had anything to do with the abduction," he said. "He was on the telephone to me at midnight, and asked me to go round to his place to see him about an impoverished property of mine in which he is interested. Of course, I did not go."

"He was establishing an alibi?" suggested Holbrook.

"I hardly think so. It was not remarkable in him to call me up at that hour, for the doctor has no idea of time. As you are probably aware, he does not sleep like a normal man, but has those queer ten-minute intervals of unconsciousness which seem to satisfy all his needs. I saw him the following day; he called here on the same matter, and I'll swear that he was in town that same night, for I went to his place and stayed with him for the greater part of an hour . . ." he hesitated. "I ought to tell you that his great scheme of transferring my land had the elements of trickery in it that annoyed me most intensely. I only discovered it last night. You probably noticed, when you came to Camden Road, that I was rather heated? The man has no conscience and no scruples. He puzzles me sometimes, at other times he fills me with despair. For under his eccentricities, there is something about him that I like, and I shall not, of course, forget our earlier association, when he gave me his time and his genius to educate me. But what do you mean about the Sons of Ragousa? That seems a fairly inoffensive association. Do you think they were concerned in the kidnapping of Miss Carew?"

"I don't think so, I am certain," said Bill vigorously. "Laffin may not have been a member of the party, but I'll swear he directed operations."

Clive came back alone, to Betty Carew's surprise.

"Where is the tireless Mr. Holbrook?" she asked.

"Gone. He's on Laffin's track, and is obsessed with the idea that the old man was responsible for your kidnapping, and, upon my word, he's almost convinced me! Betty, do you remember—can you concentrate your mind upon the forty-eight hours you disappeared? Can you recall any single incident which would help us?"

"Yes, I think I can," she said quietly. "The incidents are beginning to sort themselves out, and whilst I recognise that most of them are absurd and fantastical, the chapel and the masked men——"

"Chapel?" he said quickly. "What do you mean?"

She laughed softly.

"In a day or two I shall probably realise that these are fantasies also. But I have a recollection of being taken into a chapel—a tiny little place, with men who looked like monks, sitting in the stalls on each side of the altar; and I'm sure I heard the voice of the man who came to me at the store for the message. He gave me something, a book—I am certain it was a book—and called me the 'Long Desired.' Before and after that, my memory is a confusion of impossible happenings. But of that time I am certain. I am going to write it down tonight for Mr. Bullott."

He strode up and down the room, his hands behind him, his brow knit in thought. Then he rang the bell, and, to Benson, who appeared immediately:

"Get me all the evening newspapers that are on the streets," he said. "You may have to go to Piccadilly for the *Globe-News,* but get it."

"Why?" she asked in surprise, after Benson had disappeared.

"I have a theory. It is only a theory, and I think it can be tested by the information that has already been published."

"Clive, you're a bundle of nerves!'

"Have I reason?" he asked. "I've had the misery of your abduction, and on top of it all, the terrific news you have given me about Laffin. You'll get the marriage annulled, of course?"

"Excuse me, sir."

It was Benson, who had come in noiselessly.

"When you said all the newspapers, did your lordship mean the Socialistic journals?" he asked. "Your lordship has forbidden those newspapers to be brought into the house."

"Of course, I mean them all," said Clive, with a touch of asperity.

When the man had bowed himself out:

"Why the dickens did he come back?"

"Nerves again!" she laughed. She took up her cup. "Is it cigarettes or this insidious little cup?"

"Both," he said, and swallowed the hot tea with a wry face.

In a much shorter time than he had expected, Benson returned and laid the newspapers at his master's elbow. Clive opened one at random, skimmed the news, opened another and a third, and finally threw the journals on the floor in disgust.

"There's nothing new here at all," he said.

He spoke a little thickly. She looked at him in alarm; his face had gone white, his eyes had a queer, glazed appearance, and when he rose to his feet he stumbled, and would have fallen if she had not assisted him.

"What is the matter, Clive?" she asked.

"I don't know." He passed his hand across his forehead. "Something queer," he muttered.

She pressed the bell, and Benson came in almost immediately, and together they laid Lowbridge upon a sofa. His eyes were closed, his breathing was heavy, and when she spoke to him he did not answer.

"What is the matter, Benson?" she asked in alarm.

Benson stooped, lifted the eyelids of the unconscious man.

"I think he has been drugged, Madam," he said blandly.

IN EPPING FOREST

"I THINK, if you will leave him with me, he will be all right," said Benson. He was feeling Clive's pulse with a professional touch. "The heart action is normal, and there is nothing to be alarmed about. If you would prefer that I called a doctor——"

"Indeed I would," she said emphatically.

He bowed, and presently she heard his voice at the telephone. Until a neighbouring doctor arrived she did not leave the unconscious Clive.

"It is nothing," said the medical man. "He hasn't been smoking opium?"

She shook her head.

"Has he been smoking at all?" The doctor looked down at the cigarette ends in the hearth. "Egyptian cigarettes, I see? It often happens that these cigarettes contain opium in large or small quantities, introduced, in my opinion, by the makers, to give them flavour . . . sometimes through the carelessness of the workpeople an additional quantity gets into the tobacco. . . ."

He expounded his theory at length. When Clive was showing some sign of returning consciousness she left him in the doctor's charge and drove home, and, about an hour later, he himself telephoned to say that he had quite recovered.

"That fool of a doctor thought it was dope in the cigarettes," he said, "but I'm perfectly satisfied that my cigarettes are as harmless as candy; and, what is more, if they're Egyptian, they're made in England."

"You're not ill, are you, Clive?" she asked anxiously.

"No, I'm not ill, but I'm infernally suspicious."

He did not elucidate this cryptic remark, and when she called him again later in the evening, he was his old, cheerful self, and did not discuss the queer happening of the afternoon.

"I have Mr. Bullott with me now," he said, lowering

his voice. "You haven't seen him, by any chance?"

"No," she replied.

"I've been telling him about the dream you can remember. He doesn't seem to be impressed."

She cared very little whether Mr. Bullott was impressed or not. Her main grievance against the detective was that there had come a new lodger to the house that afternoon, and her landlady, in a flutter, had informed her that the ground floor room, so long empty because of the extortionate price demanded (the landlady dreamt dreams of entertaining a wealthy American family) had been let to a man she knew, through some obscure source of family information,—a detective.

She did not think it necessary to tell Clive this, but a great deal of her resentment at being treated as somebody who needed watching disappeared toward bedtime.

Although she was very tired, she did not fall asleep readily, turning from side to side, her mind a confusion of thoughts and recollections. Towards one o'clock she remembered, with a sense of dismay, that she had accepted an invitation to breakfast with her new-found uncle in Albemarle Street, and by sheer force of will she drove herself into sleep.

And then she felt the dreams beginning all over again. The movement, the sensation that somebody had his arm about her shoulder, and that horrid, burning pain in her right forearm. She struggled more desperately to regain consciousness than she had on the previous occasion, flung out her arms wildly, and felt her knuckles bruise against something hard. Then the creak of a door, footsteps on the stairs, and the sound of a struggle in the hall. Somebody screamed; it was the landlady. Then there was a sound like a violent explosion, which she guessed was the street door slamming, and with trembling hands she switched on the light.

Her room door was open, and as she stepped out unsteadily on to the landing the light came on in the hall, and she saw a man in violently striped pyjamas, struggling into his overcoat.

"It's all right, Miss," he called up, and she guessed, rather than knew, that this was the detective that Bullott had put into the house.

She went back to her room, and after ten minutes there was a gentle tap. She opened the door to find the detective.

"Did they come into your room? There were two of them," he said. "I don't know what made me sleep. They must have been as silent as cats."

"Who was it?" she asked tremulously.

"I don't know, Miss. There were two of them." He rubbed his head, and under his hand she saw a lump like a pigeon's egg. "They coshed me," he said tersely. "Do you mind if I come into your room and have a look round?"

The shivering landlady had joined the party by now, and stood with Betty watching the detective conduct his search. He stooped to pick something from the floor.

"Here's a hypodermic, half filled with something," he said, shaking it. "No, there's nothing else, as far as I can see. Gosh, that fellow was a big 'un—the man that hit me! I guess his heart was pure all right."

"Why?" she asked innocently.

"Because he had the strength of ten," said Officer Brown, and evidently this was a stock jest with him, for he shook with laughter. "There's no other trouble? You'll have to get some bolts on that door and a chain."

"Do you think they came after me?" she asked.

"Yes, and I ought to be kicked for letting them get past me. Bullott told me to shoot, but I've got an Englishman's constitutional objection to using a gun."

Apparently he telephoned to Bullott, for later, as she was dropping to sleep, she heard that officer's voice in the hall, and, looking at the phosphorescent dial of her watch, saw that it was a quarter to three. She heard no more, for she slept steadily till her landlady wakened her at half-past eight.

"Mr. Brown says you're not to go by 'bus or train; he has a car waiting for you," was her remarkable news,

and Betty found that this was the case. Looking out of the window, she saw a handsome saloon, obviously hired, and it was in state that she drove up to Albemarle Court, and Lambert Stone, waiting for her on the tiny balcony of his study-drawing-room, chuckled to himself.

"You are sensible, after all," he said, as he took her wrap. "I told you to spend money——"

"The car doesn't belong to me," she interrupted solemnly. "I wouldn't have been guilty of such a piece of extravagance! But Mr. Bullott thinks that, having been abducted once, and a second attempt having been made, the third time may pay for all."

He listened with a grave face while she tried to make light of her second adventure of the night.

"That's bad," he said. "Young lady, I'm going to take you off to America."

"Not really?"

"Yes," he nodded. "We're sailing on the *Escorial;* on Saturday week—I booked the tickets provisionally last night. You needn't stay in America," he went on hastily. "I promise you that I will not attempt to make an heiress of you. But you ought to see our great country, and somehow I think you'll come often when you've seen it once! And I'm making up a party; I've just been on to Lowbridge, and he has promised to be my guest. I'll even invite your favourite reporter——"

"Please don't," she asked hastily, "if by 'favourite reporter' you mean Mr. Holbrook."

He laughed again. "Why, that's unkind," he said, "considering William discovered you—William and his questionable friend. Anyway, you'll come?"

"It will be fun. Where do we go—to New York?"

"New York will hardly suit you in July," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "No, we're going up to my camp in the Adirondacks. That will be an experience for you, young lady, and I shall be able to look after you there, with Laffin three thousand five hundred miles away."

"You still believe Dr. Laffin is the villain of the piece?" she asked.

"We all believe that—Holbrook, Bullott and I. I haven't asked Lowbridge; I guess he's too loyal to say what he thinks!"

On the following Sunday afternoon Bill Holbrook awoke from his afternoon doze, struggled sleepily to his feet and filled his pipe before he went out and filled his bath. His unfinished notes for Monday's newspaper lay on his table, and he read them over, his lip curling at the thought of his own inadequacy.

"Padding," he growled, "padding and stalling!"

And he was not far from the truth. The Brother John murder had ceased to fill the important columns of the newspapers, and had been relegated to ten-line paragraphs on inside pages. Newer matters of public interest usurped the leading columns, and Bill Holbrook's *raison d'être* was disappearing.

When he had come out of his bath and returned to his room, he found Bullot in his shirt-sleeves, a pipe between his teeth, a scowl of misery on his face. He stood glaring out of the window at his garden.

"Cheer up, misery," grunted Bill. "It is I who am going to be killed to-night!"

"You're not going on the Epping Road."

"Why not?" asked Bill. "It will be broad daylight at nine o'clock; the road will be alive with cyclists and motor-cars; nobody is going to kidnap me."

"I can't understand this affair. I'm well out of my depth," he said. "I suppose I ought really to hand over my job to a real policeman."

"Real nothing!" snarled Bill. "What's the matter with you, Cuthbert? Do you expect things to unfold themselves as quickly as they would in a short story? You're nutty! You're finding out something new every day!"

"But is it worth finding out?" demanded the other, in a tone of complete weariness. "I seem to spend my time discovering the roots of other trees! Do you remember some time ago telling me about an immense sea captain you'd met—a big man with a voice like a foghorn?"

Bill nodded.

"I saw him to-day," Bullott went on, "and trailed him —to where do you think? To a respectable lodging in Bloomsbury, where he goes to bed at ten every night and gets up at six every morning, and doesn't do anything more criminal than smoke cigarettes. So they tell me—yet if Harvey Hale wasn't one of the people who tried to lift Miss Carew last night I'm a lunatic. I told Marsh this, and the poor mysterious hound got so excited, you might have thought I'd given him information that the murderer of Brother John was under lock and key!"

"Maybe his excitement was justified," said Bill. "When are you making your raid?"

"To-morrow night—unless I get fired from this job before," said Bullott.

"You have had no word from Tinker Lane?"

Bullott's grimace was the answer.

"He has got cold feet," he said; "possibly one of the Twenty-Third Degree folk tipped him off that he was running risks—you can easily scare that kind of fellow. Or, what is more likely, if there is any sort of illegality in the degree they have paid him to skip."

Bill shook his head.

"Did they pay Brother John to skip?" he asked, and Bullott did not reply.

When Bill Holbrook reached the third milestone on the Epping Road, he found that his prediction was more than fulfilled. As far as he could see, the long forest road was covered with cyclists and motor-cars, and the chance of a repetition of the attempt which had been made upon him was even more remote than he had imagined.

The third milestone was a little difficult to discover; it stood back from the roadway and was half-covered with undergrowth, but what had an especial interest for him was the white envelope which must have been placed there very recently, for the wood was filled with strolling couples and it was hardly likely that the letter would have escaped observation had it been in its place any considerable time.

Never doubting that it was for him, he pulled it from the thorny briars which held it in its place, and, as he had expected, he found his name written on the cover.

"Follow the red confetti,"

was all that it said.

He looked round; there was no sign of confetti, red or otherwise. And then, peering into the cool depths of a wood, he thought he saw something red on the ground, and went nearer. Yes, that was it, a sprinkle of tiny red paper discs beneath a tree. He went a little distance farther on, and now the trail was clear.

It led him along a well-worn path, and was so carefully laid that Bill guessed that the average pleasure-seeker would not notice its presence. After a while it left the path, branching off to the right, and threading a way between the trees.

It was clear to him that the part of the wood through which he was now moving was one which was very seldom visited by picnic parties. Every few steps he took startled some wild creature in the underbrush. He had a glimpse of a hare flying to his burrow; he saw a lithe black shape darting through the grasses in pursuit of his quarry; and once he disturbed a vixen with her prick-eared litter. And the red confetti led on and on, until it crossed a small stream on the farther banks of which his unknown guide had left the paper more thickly strewn that it might not escape his attention.

He had to climb the bank before he came to a plantation of young trees, so thick that it was with some difficulty that he made his way into the depths. He stood and listened; no sound broke the stillness of the quiet forest; the dusk was coming, the light in the sky had deepened to a richer and darker blue; the dying sun's rays shot slantwise, and when he reached an open space his shadow ran at incredible length along the grass before him.

The sun gave him his direction; he was travelling south-east, and had been travelling south-east all the

time, but suddenly the trail shot off at right angles, and he followed cautiously, his hand upon the round, hard object in his pocket, every sense alert.

Ten minutes' walking brought him within view of a small lodge hut. It lay in a clearance at the foot of the slope down which he was moving when he first sighted the building. Again he stopped, looked and listened, but saw and heard nothing. Down the gentle hill the trail led to the rough door of the hut, and there stopped.

His heart was beating a little faster as he walked quickly to the door, gripped the handle and pulled it wide open. The interior was in darkness; he heard neither the breathing of men nor movement, and looked round suspiciously at the darkening forest. He looked again into the hut; his eyes were now accustomed to the gloom, and he saw something moving, something that swayed left and right rhythmically. He struck a match, and stepped back with a gasp of horror.

Hanging from a beam in the roof was the body of a man, and, as he looked, the distorted face turned towards him. It was the face of the Tinker!

Alone in that valley of death for a second, his courage deserted him, and he felt his hands trembling.

"No weakness, Danton," he quoted mockingly at himself, and, running across the floor of the vale, mounted the slope, his eyes still searching for the confetti trail, and went at a jogtrot back the way he had come.

He had reached the plantation when he felt, rather than saw, the ambush into which he was falling. Hampered as he was by the closely growing trees, his progress was slow.

Plop!

He had heard that sound before, but this time the bullet missed, and snicked the bark of a growing beech, and went, whining and humming, into the wood.

The second shot went even wider, and then he came to a place where the trees were less thickly planted, where he had had elbow room and a clear throw. He stopped and took a Mills bomb from his pocket, pulled out the

pin, and as he saw the flash of a third shot, flung it with all his might in the direction of the hidden assassin. In another second he was flying like a man demented. He judged his time perfectly, and flung himself on the ground only the fraction of a moment before the bomb exploded. From somewhere behind he heard a shriek, and, rising to his feet, ran swiftly.

He had missed the trail, but he had a rough idea of direction. Once he stopped to take breath, listening intently, but there was no sign of pursuit. Ten minutes later he heard voices and footsteps ahead of him, saw a figure come into view, and was challenged by a familiar voice.

"It's all right, Bullot—Holbrook speaking."

"What was that explosion?" asked Bullott.

Bill saw that there were three men with him. It was not necessary to ask what had brought him here, but the detective volunteered the information.

"I followed you, of course," he said, "but I lost you in the wood, and I didn't realise that they'd laid a trail for you, until one of my men showed me the confetti. What was the explosion?" he asked again.

Bill explained briefly, and together they went back the way he had come.

That somebody had been wounded was clear from the bloodstains. Some of the dried undergrowth was burning, and this they put out with little difficulty. But of the assailant there was no sign.

Sending one of his men back for an ambulance, the inspector accompanied Bill to the hut in the vale. To Bill's surprise the door of the hut was locked, and it was an hour before they succeeded, with the help of a ranger, in getting the door open. Bullott flashed his lamp inside: it fell upon a loose, hanging rope, newly severed. The body of Tinker Lane had disappeared!

"It would take a week's search to find the body," said Bullott, as they were driving home together. "There are dozens of pits and caves into which they could have thrown him. It was an act of lunacy for you to go there at all."

"You'll pinch Laffin, of course?" said Bill.

"No, sir," he answered quietly. "I've no evidence upon which I can arrest the doctor. I haven't even got the body. But this I can tell you, that Laffin is being watched closer than a fire! There is nothing to do but to wait until the rangers discover the body, and that may take weeks. We have one chance of connecting Laffin with these crimes. I am taking that chance to-morrow night."

"You mean the raid on the Priory?"

"There is no better time. Do you know what happens next week?"

"The only thing I know that happens next week is that the mysterious twenty-ninth of July occurs on Saturday."

"Next week they declare the Midsummer argosies of the Sons of Ragousa," said Bullott. "That means that the draw takes place either Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. I guess it is Monday, because your cousin, Mr. Pawter, is arranging to leave London for Plymouth by the 10.30 train to-morrow morning."

Bullott was not visible for the rest of the evening. He locked himself up in his room and gave himself entirely to the problem of the Sons of Ragousa. It was a problem seemingly insoluble. What importance should he give to the mysterious hints of Toby Marsh? What could Marsh tell him? His passion for secrecy had allowed him only to give the most tantalising glimpses of his mind, and toward eleven o'clock Bullott took a sudden decision. He kicked off his slippers, pulled on his shoes, and, without saying a word to his lodger, who, he knew, was working in his room, went out.

Soon after midnight a taxi brought him to Robbs Road,

and to the house which he knew was occupied by the burglar.

"Your luck's in," said Toby Marsh, who opened the door to him. "Five minutes later, and you'd have missed me."

"Are you going out?" asked Bullott, regarding him with professional suspicion.

"I'm going out, but on a perfectly childlike errand," said Toby Marsh. "In fact, I'm going to a party, and if you're a wise man you'll go home, get into your glad clothes and join me."

Toby was wearing an old-fashioned tuxedo.

"You look good enough to eat," said Bullott admiringly. "Where are you going?"

"To Madame La Florette, at her palatial home on Portman Place," said Toby. "I've had an invitation by card, and I guess Jenny won't object if I bring a friend."

Bullott's first thought was to decline the invitation.

"I'll go with you if you'll tell me something I want to know."

"Make no conditions, my busy friend," said Toby, "I'm offering you the experience of a lifetime. What do you want to know?"

"I want a little more information about Laffin."

"I can tell you a whole lot," said the other. "Laffin is at this moment"—he looked at his watch—"interviewing Captain Harvey Hale, that queer man of the sea. If you were sitting in his study you'd learn no more than I already know, and which I'll tell you in course of time. By the way did the impetuous and inexperienced Mr. Holbrook keep his appointment?"

"He did," said the other grimly.

"And he got back alive. I guessed that because you're not very agitated. And did he find Tinker?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"I guessed. Alive or dead?"

"Dead," said Bullott.

"I was afraid that was how it would be. It occurred to me this afternoon what an excellent opportunity there

was for drama in that wood, and there can be no doubt about the dramatic instincts of the Ragousas."

"Marsh, you know a little too much about this business," said Bullott, his old suspicions aroused.

"I'm beginning to think you're right," said Toby, with a sigh. "I found myself dreaming about them last night —the Ragousas, I mean." He looked thoughtfully at the detective. "Are you pretty strong?" he asked.

"Fairly," said Bullott.

"Could you work four hours at a stretch in an atmosphere of a hundred and four degrees?"

"Why?" asked the astounded Bullott.

"I'm asking you," said the imperturbable burglar. "Would your constitution stand up to it?"

"I think so; I am a fairly healthy man," said Bullott. "But what's the mystery? Do you ever speak straight out and say what you mean, Marsh?"

"Only when I plead not guilty," said Mr. Marsh.

As Bullott opened the door of his house, Bill Holbrook came to the head of the stairs, and was promptly invited to join the party; and, guessing more from Marsh's manner than from what he said, Bill, whose inclinations were towards bed, changed quickly and joined the little man in Bullott's sitting-room.

"Here's a strange thing, Holbrook," said Toby. "Florette's been in that new house of hers about ten minutes. Well, say a couple of days. You wouldn't think she'd have got the invitations out so quick, would you, as she has? And some swell performers have been engaged. Half the stars at the opera have had a hurry-up call, and Bazley's are doing the refreshments."

"She asked you, but she didn't ask me; do I get thrown out?"

"You stick to me, boy," said Toby, "and you'll see something."

There was very little to see when they reached Portman Place, except masses of people. The ballroom was so crowded that dancing was impossible. In the big drawing-room, the throng who had gathered to listen to a great

coloratura bulged out through the doorway into the hall. And the harassed servants, newly engaged, challenged neither Toby nor the two people who accompanied him.

Of La Florette there was no sign, but by judicious inquiry Marsh discovered that there was a card-room on the ground floor, and it was here that he met his hostess and introduced his friends. La Florette favoured him with a mechanical smile, and shot a quick, surprised glance from Holbrook to the detective.

"I've seen you somewhere, young man?" she said.

"A reporter on the *Post-Herald*," said Toby in a stage whisper. "I thought I'd bring him along in case you wanted any publicity."

"Well, I don't," snapped Florette. "I'm very glad to see you, Mr. What's-your-name, but I don't want anything about this party to go in the newspapers."

With a nod she passed on to join a grey-haired man, whose eyes had never left her.

"That is Sir Richard Paxton, of the Treasury," said Bill, recognising him. "What is he doing in this galley?"

"Paxton has been a front-row lizard at all La Florette's productions for the past two years," Toby answered.

"I've heard that Treasury officials go mad at fifty-five," said Bill. "This is one of those cases. I wonder who is paying the bill?"

Somebody else in the party was pondering that question. Mr. Charles Van Campe was amazed, but also alarmed, at the prodigality of the entertainment. He waited an opportunity, which was long in coming, to take his friends to the little study at the back of the hall which she had reserved for her own use that night.

"Kid, this is fine, I hope you've so fixed it with Laffin, that there's no come-back. Did he give you any money?"

She mentioned a sum and he whistled.

"That wouldn't pay the breakage bill," he said. "You want to see him right away and get this scheme of his on a proper business basis. A man told me yesterday that he's near broke, and I know for a fact that he's only paid a deposit on the rent of this house."

"He will not let me down," she said, but she was a little uneasy. "I'm 'phoning him to-night—I was hoping he would come, but he told me he was too busy."

" 'Phone him now," urged Van Campe, troubled.

She locked the door and called Laffin's number.

"He's probably in bed," she said. "Those kind of men do not keep late hours——"

Even as she spoke she heard Laffin's gentle voice.

"It is La Florette speaking, Doctor," she said in a low voice. "I have the information you wanted." And in two sentences she told him all he wished to know, though she did not realise this until a long time afterwards. "And Doctor, don't you think it would be wise if you let me have some money? The five hundred you sent me will not go very far. The band has cost a hundred, and the people who supply the refreshments want a cheque to-morrow morning."

"That will be quite in order, Miss Florette," said the soothing voice of the doctor. "You need have no apprehension. I will send you a cheque by the early morning delivery."

Before she could urge this need still further, he had switched off.

"Well, that's that," she said with a sigh of relief. "I don't think you need worry, Charles. Now come and meet some of my friends."

"Who is that queer-looking man in glasses?"

"He's a friend of mother's," she said, bitterly regretting that, in a moment of expansiveness, induced by Toby Marsh's unblushing flattery, she had sent him an invitation at all.

"I know the reporter who is with him; he ought to be able to get some good publicity for you."

"Dr. Laffin doesn't want a word in the newspapers. Can you beat it?" she said, with pardonable exasperation. "I'm supposed to be getting publicity out of this stunt of his, and yet not a line must be published!"

She saw the three standing in the hall together as she went back to the ballroom, and observed with satisfac-

tion that Mr. Marsh was being helped into his coat.

Toby was the first to leave, and stood waiting for the other two whilst the footman found their belongings. Bill had walked out on to the street, and Bullott was following, when he heard the footman say:

"Excuse me, sir," and felt in his pocket for a tip. "Can I have a word with you?"

The detective looked at the servant in surprise.

"Yes, certainly," he said.

The footman came with him to the sidewalk.

"You don't know me, sir, but I know you. You're Mr. Bullott of Headquarters, aren't you?"

"That is so," said Bullott, as the man made a sign. "You're a Ragousa?"

"I wanted to talk to you about that," the man went on. "I was at the lodge when you were initiated. You wouldn't know me, because I was one of the two men who put on your robes."

Bullott remembered the two attendants in the anteroom who had assisted himself and Bill Holbrook to don the livery of the Proud Sons.

"What I wanted to ask you, sir, was this," said the man, lowering his voice and glancing back at the open door. "Do you think everything is all square and aboveboard with the Ragousas? It used to be," he went on quickly. "When I joined the order, about ten years ago, it was one of the most brotherly societies you could wish for. And don't think, sir, that I'm trying to knock the order because they put me down from the Twenty-Third and made me a small lodge member. We don't mind that, because it has happened to so many of us, and, after all, it's an honour to have been up above at all."

"You were a Twenty-Third Degree-er, were you?"

"Yes, sir, I was a member of the Twenty-Third Degree for five years, until I got the order from the Worshipful Master that I was to return to the lower lodge. As I say, there's nothing in that, but what I can't understand is the queer birds who are taking our place."

"Where does the Twenty-Third Degree meet?"

The man hesitated.

"That's a thing I'm not supposed to tell you, sir, but as I've said so much, I might as well say a little more. They work the degree at the Deptford Lodge. As a matter of fact, there isn't a Deptford Lodge at all, for although it is supposed to be just an ordinary lodge, only Twenty-Third Degree men are members."

"What kind of fellows are being initiated into the Twenty-Third?"

"The scum of the earth," said the man emphatically. "If they'd raked the mud of the Thames, they couldn't have got up worse specimens! There isn't a riverside thief that hasn't been initiated. The proper number for the Twenty-Third is fifty members, but now there must be a hundred."

"Give me the address of the lodge-room," said Bullott, and scribbled it down on his shirt-cuff.

"You don't mind me telling you this?" asked the footman anxiously. "I feel I'm betraying the Order, and the Ragousas do queer things to people who talk too much."

"You can trust me," said Bullott, and bidding good-night to the footman he walked quickly after his two companions, who were slowly pacing towards Oxford Circus.

"Mr. Yellowplush is one of your men, I suppose?" said Toby Marsh, and Bullott did not correct that mistaken impression.

Mr. Toby Marsh did not return to his lodgings, but pursued his way to the Camden Road. Not a hundred yards from Dr. Laffin's house was a group of small shops huddled together as though in fear of the encroachments of their more pretentious neighbours. Each had its narrow front, its small side door which led to the regions above, and in the lock of one of these, Mr. Marsh inserted a key and passed through.

At the end of the cramped passage a flight of stairs led to the upper floors. He did not stop until he reached the poorly furnished attic room which he had rented a few weeks before. Lighting the gas, he pulled down the win-

dow shade carefully, and care was needed, for through the open window top trailed a wire which ran to a small box and a pair of headphones that stood on the wash-stand.

When he had excluded himself from chance observation, he pulled up a chair, and, fixing the receivers to his ear, sat down to listen. What he heard was apparently all-engrossing, for he did not stir for an hour except to jot down a note or two on the writing-pad which lay convenient to his hand. At the end of the hour, he took off his 'phones and, rising, stretched himself.

From the bottom of a cupboard he took out a small, leather case, opened it and removed one by one the instruments of his craft, delicate little tools, larger ones, ingeniously devised and fitting together by clamps and screws, keys of unusual pattern, saws of strange shape —he laid them on the bed and surveyed them with a speculative eye.

Looking out of the window, he saw, to his surprise, that the sky was going grey, and this fact apparently brought about an alteration of his plans, for he replaced the tools one by one, and five minutes later was walking briskly down Camden Road. A plain-clothes patrol saw his gleaming spectacles, noted the handbag he carried, and turned toward him.

"Good morning, Toby."

"Good morning, Sergeant."

Toby stopped.

"Early to rise, wealthy and wise," said the detective. "Got a crop of early worms in that little bag of yours?"

Without a word Toby handed over the bag, and without a word the officer opened and searched. He found nothing but a dozen folders dealing with the joys and comforts of Atlantic travel.

"Thinking of going abroad, Toby?" he smiled, as he snapped the bag close and handed it back.

"Yep. My doctor has recommended a sea voyage."

"You've found a nice boat—the *Escorial*. I almost thought you'd been smashing a shipping office when I saw

those folders." The detective was still in doubt, and, putting down his bag, Toby Marsh extended his arms.

"Run me over, son—you're itching to do it, and I'm in a hurry."

The officer's palms ran lightly over Toby Marsh.

"Clean bill," he said. "Sorry to pull you up, but there's something very sinister about early rising."

"Good morning."

Toby passed on without annoyance. The officer had not searched his hat, in the lining of which were three small keys, two of which gave him the entrance to Dr. Laffin's house, and the other to the last place in the world that even Bullott would have imagined.

THE LISTENER IN THE CHIMNEY

Dr. Laffin had spent the greater part of the evening with a companion who, æsthetically, was repugnant to him, but in other ways was a wholly desirable associate. He finished his short conversation with La Florette, pushed aside the telephone and, leaning back in his chair, watched his guest pull the cork from a second large bottle and pour the yellow, bubbling fluid into a large wine-glass that stood on the edge of the writing desk.

Captain Harvey Hale was a man of no particular reticence, and not even the somewhat chilling atmosphere of that dark study, nor the eerie references which the doctor made to unseen presences, dulled his geniality in such moments as these.

"Land work," he said, smacking his lips, "or sea work, it's all one to Harvey Hale. You can't help accidents, or, as we call them at sea, the acts of God, and you can't stop men like this blooming Holbrook wriggling out of a trap, it doesn't matter how clever you are. Personally, I think it's a waste of time bothering with a whippersnapper like that—a man I could break in two across my knee." He lifted his glass. "To the sunny islands and lashings of money!"

He drained its contents at a gulp.

"You couldn't have come to a better man than me, Commodore," he said, nodding his head slowly.

"You have spoken to the men?"

"Spoken to them?" The room shook with the sea captain's laughter. "You don't want to speak to that kind of cattle; you just give them an order and that's enough. They know me; there isn't a sailorman that's shipped before the mast who doesn't know Harvey 'Ale."

In his cups the captain was inclined to take liberties with the English language.

"They're ripe and willing. They know there's a big job ahead, and they're ready to do it. What is it, Doctor?"

"You'll know in good time," said Laffin. "It may not be necessary: everything depends upon to-morrow, my good friend. In my life I have had one very grave disappointment, the gravest that any man could face. That a second should await me seems incredible, and yet there is that possibility."

His visitor growled something under his breath.

"I hope you're disappointed, that's all," he said. "That is, if it gives a chance to Harvey Hale to do something big. What are you going to do about that girl?"

Dr. Laffin's lips pressed tightly together, but he did not answer.

"It wasn't my fault that we didn't get her the second time. I got her first time all right, didn't I? Why didn't you keep her? That was your fault? How was I to know that they'd got a 'busy' downstairs sleeping on the premises?"

"I'm not blaming you," said the doctor in his mincing way. "Believe me, I do not blame you. The fates were not propitious. My supreme genius, the mighty Kemelsina, master of my destiny"—he waved an airy hand to the cornice, and instinctively Hale looked up as though he expected to find a material manifestation—"my great exemplar was not in sympathy with the movement."

Before him was spread a double sheet of foolscap, and once more he adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses, and with

his finger moving down each line of writing, he perused the document from beginning to end in silence.

"You have sent the first party away?" asked Laffin.

"They've arrived. I had a cable from them this morning," said Hale, "ready and willing and hearty."

"Who has the sealed envelope?"

"Collinson's in charge," said Harvey Hale. "He's a good seaman and knows all about sealed orders. You can trust him, Commodore. I've told him if he breaks the seal I'll break his head! He knows me—sailed with me a dozen times. When Harvey Hale says he'll break a man's head, by God, it's as good as broken! I'm that way, Commodore. My word's as good as a lawyer's agreement, stamped and sealed. There ain't a man from Shanghai to Valp'riso that doesn't know that when I say a thing I mean it."

"Yes, yes," said Laffin testily. "I suppose in your brutal way you have the elements of greatness. I am large enough to recognise your claims. But behind this scheme is a mentality beyond your understanding, a genius outside the range of your comprehension. You are an instrument, Captain, please remember that; merely the instrument, that is wielded by my gigantic intellect."

"We are two big men together," said Captain Hale comfortably. "Put it there, Commodore!"

Dr. Laffin ignored the extended hand.

"Now go home, my friend. I think you have drunk enough. From now on you keep sober—you understand?"

"Drink has never meant anything to me," said the captain, rising, and considering the quantity he had consumed that evening, both his speech and his poise were extraordinarily steady. "I could drink a distillery dry and walk a chalk line. Ask any man you've ever met who knows the sea, has he ever seen Harvey Hale drunk? What will they answer?"

Dr. Laffin did not trouble to inquire. He walked into the passage, opened the door, and cut short a further panegyric on the merits and qualities of Harvey Hale by closing the door gently in the face of that worthy man.

He did not return to his study, but went upstairs to the top floor, where he had imprisoned Betty Carew. The door which Holbrook had broken had been repaired, and fastened even more securely. He was in the "suite" for ten minutes before he came back to the study. A somewhat tidy minded man, he gathered together a number of notes he had made, examined them one by one, and finally, after half an hour's memorising, carried the scraps of paper to the fireplace, struck a match and lit them. As they blazed up, a puff of smoke came out into the room; it was as though the chimney was blocked. He stooped and looked up. Concealed from view by the edge of the fireplace, and half-resting on a brick projection, was a small black box.

He stamped out the paper fire, reached up and tried to pull it down, but it was fastened to something. He pulled with all his strength; there was a snap, and the box came away in his hand.

Now he saw what had held it in place: a long strand of wire, which he had snapped. The box, which was black with soot and had evidently been lowered down the chimney, was about six inches square, and roughly made. He put it on his table and examined it curiously; then, with the aid of a pair of scissors, he ripped off one side, and had no need to look further to discover the significance of his find. It was a sensitive microphone.

For a second his face went grey. Who had placed it there? What had been heard?

He passed out of the room, up the stairs, and through the locked door of the top floor suite. In a locked lumber-room at the back of the house was a small trap-door that led to the roof, which served as an emergency fire escape. In five minutes he was walking along the flat roof until he was brought up by a high chimney stack.

Yes, there it was—from one of the chimney pots a length of wire led across the roof and down one side of the house. To make any further search that night was impracticable. What should he do?

He sat until dawn showed, his malignant eyes fixed

upon the telltale instrument, and then, with some labour, he replaced the box where he had found it and made a rough splice of the broken wire. Whoever was listening should hear something a little more puzzling than they had heard before.

MR. PAWTER EXPLAINS

Mr. Pawter was in his office when Bill called. He was reading a newspaper, whistling softly the while, a practice peculiar to men of an equable temperament.

"The return of the wanderer," he murmured. "Please tell the cashier to have the fatted calf slaughtered with appropriate ceremony. You will find your room in order, and your desk so innocent of muddle that you will hardly feel at home for a day or two. And——"

"Pips, I want a story out of you," said Bill, seating himself on the other side of the table.

"You are still engaged in the profession from which I rescued you?" he asked wearily. "And you want a story? I should be false to the traditions of my agency if I missed a chance of getting good publicity. What is the story? Does it pay to advertise? Yes, it does."

"Pips," interrupted Bill again, "the story I want is about a priory and a Seen Prior."

Mr. Pawter eyed him steadily.

"That is exactly the kind of story I can't give you," he said, "not for publication anyway."

"I don't want it for publication. I want to know what you are in this outfit."

"You seem to know already," Mr. Pawter smiled faintly. "I am a Prior—in other words, I am the accountant of the Proud Sons of Ragousa. You didn't know that I was an accountant? Accountancy was my long suit, and I am a member of the Chartered Society. There is nothing mysterious about me, William. I am surprised you should have imagined there was."

"Did you know Brother John?"

Pawter's face became instantly grave.

"Yes, I knew him," he said quietly. And then, after long reflection: "I'd better tell you the story of my connection with this society. The head of the Ragousas, as you probably know, is Mr. Leiff Stone. Ragousa, as you will know if any of your school learning remains, was at one time the richest town in Dalmatia, the port from which the argosies sailed—'argosy' means literally 'a vessel of Ragousa.' Many years ago I was associated with Stone in business, and when he had got the Order running, and his prize scheme had caught on to such an extent that members were flocking into the Order, he sent for me and asked if I would put it upon a proper business basis. Naturally, it was not the kind of thing which greatly interested me—secret societies and all that sort of stuff—but there were very many reasons why I should take up the work. In the first place, two thousand a year——"

"Dollars?" asked Bill.

"I am speaking of our own depleted currency," said Mr. Pawter. "No, two thousand pounds was the salary offered to me, and a very acceptable sum it was. I did not like the lottery idea very much; as a business man it had no appeal for me, and, moreover, it struck me that it erred on the side of illegality. However, the police seemed satisfied that the Ragousas should have their argosies, and who am I to oppose my opinion to the law officers of the Crown? I undertook the work, but on the understanding that I should not be one of the masks. I pointed out to Leiff Stone the extraordinary opportunities that existed in the Order for impersonation and fraud, unless there was one man whom everybody knew by sight, and who could be distinguished from the rest of the crowd. He fell in with my views, and ever since it has been my duty to draw the numbers which bring fortune to members of the Order."

"Just a minute," interrupted Bill. "The revenue of the Ragousas is a pretty heavy one, isn't it?"

"It has a turnover of something between six hundred

and seven hundred thousand pounds a year, and half of that goes in argosies—nearly half."

"Now is it possible," said Bill, "for a swindler to obtain admission to the Priory, and, by impersonating one or the other officers, secure a hold of that money?"

"Absolutely impossible," said Pawter emphatically, and Bill showed his surprise. "The grafter who tried that would get the shock of his life. Nobody, not even the Grand Prior himself, can touch any of the money, and certainly cannot touch the prize money. I will explain the system. When a man is initiated into the Proud Sons of Ragousa, he pays ten dollars; he pays another ten dollars every year. Half of that money is banked by the local lodge in what is known as 'A' account, with the London, Southern & Northern Bank. That is, in fact, the prize fund, which is only released to the men who win the argosies, on a cheque signed by me and initialled by the Grand Prior. Is that clear?"

Bill nodded.

"Of the other pound—the other half of your subscription that is to say—a proportion is retained for working expenses of the lodge, and the remainder, a definite sum, is remitted to the Grand Priory. It is, I might tell you, a very insignificant amount—I refer to the amount that goes to headquarters—just sufficient to keep the Priory running, with very little surplus, and it is known as the Prior's Tax. So obviously there is nothing to be gained from getting control of the Priory. The only big stuff that is handled is the Argosy Fund, which is never really in the Prior's hands."

"What about the Twenty-Third Degree?"

"That also has a small income," nodded Pawter, "and the Grand Lodge is in the same case—there are no surpluses."

"Isn't it possible to fake the draw?"

"I draw the numbers, bare-armed. There are really five draws," he explained, "and the Priors, who sit in council beforehand, decide which of the five shall be the 'true draw.' So I am absolutely in ignorance as to which

they will decide upon, and I could not fake if I wanted to. The five numbers, or the five groups of numbers, are written down, and then the Priors tell me which of the groups is the 'true draw,' and there is nothing more for me to do but to turn up the names that correspond with the numbers and forward the cheques."

"The more businesslike the Ragousas become, the more mysterious they are!" he said. "There doesn't seem to be a foothold for a crook, unless the crook happens to be you."

"Even I haven't much of a chance," he began.

"Tell me one thing: have you ever seen Leiff Stone's face since he became a Prior?"

"I know him only by his purple gown. If I met him to-day in the street I should not recognise him."

"Who was Brother John?"

"Brother John was the Grand Prior's assistant, and was the only parson in the bunch."

"What is there concealed at the Priory?"

"Nothing," said Pawter emphatically. "I know the Priory from gate to cellar. I know every cell in it, every inch of it, and I tell you that if there's anything more innocent than a Prior of the Proud Sons of Ragousa."

Poor Bullott, thought Bill! The raid was abortive before it was made. But he could not tell the inspector this or take the responsibility for checking his plans.

"Have you the least suspicion of an idea in your mind why Brother John was murdered?"

"Not the least. He was a man without enemies, a man who had no private feuds; beyond his devotion to Stone, I know of no very great friendship of his. The murder is inexplicable, and I can only suppose that the shot fired at Brother John was either intended for somebody else, or——"

"Don't say it was an accident," said Bill, "because that kind of accident hardly happens twice in twenty-four hours. The man who shot Brother John took one good crack at me, and nearly got me."

"There are certain advantages in having a small head,"

murmured Mr. Pawter as he closed the door upon his sometime assistant.

THE PRIORY

At six o'clock that summer evening a station taxi dropped Mr. Pawter at the Two Bridges Hotel, an ancient hostelry set in the heart of Dartmoor. He paid the driver and watched the machine grow smaller and smaller on the long road that led to Newton Abbot, and then he went into the hotel, engaged a room and ordered his meal. He was evidently no stranger to the place, for the old waiter greeted him as a friend.

"Going up to see them Priors to-night, sir?" he asked the identical question that he had asked some twenty times before, and Mr. Pawter gave him the conventional answer. "They've been busy up at the Priory lately," said the old man as he laid the cloth. "I don't remember when we've seen so many people going and coming. Motor cars all hours of the day and night. And somebody's been sick there, too: I saw an ambulance going up—when was it? Must have been last week sometime. I've got a cottage right on the road," said the garrulous old gentleman, pausing with his hands full of knives and forks and tableware. "You can't go to the Priory without passing me. And what with my rheumatics, I haven't been sleeping as well as I might. As you might say, my cottage is a sort of a lodge for the Priory. Monks, ain't they, sir?"

"Sort of monks," said Pawter.

"I don't know what good they get out of shutting themselves up all their lives, but they're as close as oysters. You never see any of them down here, not even the lay brothers. That seems queer to me!"

Mr. Pawter listened with the amused air of one who was indulging a child, and after he had been served with his meal, changed into a golf suit, and, with a walking stick in his hand, strolled out on to the moor, striking

across the gaunt countryside towards a smaller road which he knew ran parallel with the post-road.

He was a mile from his objective when he saw the waiting car, a small American machine that was invariably employed to take him to the Priory. The elderly man at the wheel touched his cap as Pawter came up. He wore the blue serge suit which was the livery of all the workers at the Priory, and Pawter knew him by name.

"All well at the Priory?" he asked.

"All well, sir," said the old man.

"Nobody been ill?"

"No, sir," said the other in surprise, "not that I know."

They proceeded for a mile in silence, and then Pawter asked:

"How is the Grand Prior?"

"Very well, sir, so far as I know. We never see much of him. He doesn't come through the main gates."

Pawter nodded. He was the only prior that ever went through the main gates. There was, in one corner of the wall, a small portal which was known as the Prior's Door, and had been used for hundreds of years for the convenience of the superior of that order which the Proud Sons of Ragousa had replaced.

"He comes and goes by night, as you know, sir," said the driver. "As a matter of fact, all the brethren do but you. I hope there's going to be a bit of luck for my lodge this drawing," he added. "We haven't had an argosy come to Plymouth so long as I can remember. Little prizes, but none of the big ones. And it's curious that we never get them at the Priory—none of the lay brothers, I mean."

"Your number goes in with the rest," said Pawter good-humouredly.

Every lodge had a mild grievance that the argosies came a little too infrequently in their direction. The provincial branches were certain that London got more than its share; London pointed dolefully to the scarcity of prizes awarded to Metropolitan lodges.

The car dipped into a valley, turned abruptly round a

great stone tor, through another valley, and then on the left, between the secondary and the main road, Pawter saw the familiar lines of the Priory, squat, unlovely, so much a part of the moor in colour and cheerlessness that a stranger might pass it by without knowing that the Priory existed. The walls were high and grey, overgrown with ivy and other creeping plants. The great gates, which swung open at their approach, always reminded him of a prison. But inside he came upon peace.

Pawter got down and followed the silent attendant through a small doorway and along a stone passage, at the end of which the man opened an uninviting door that looked more like the door of a cell than of the handsome suite it was. The open grate was banked high with flowers; the floor was covered with a thick carpet, and the furnishing of the apartment was luxurious.

From this room there was an opening, unfurnished with door, into the bedroom. It was a typical suite of the silent Priors of Ragousa. The bookshelves which half-covered one stone wall were well-filled.

"Hall is at eight, sir," said the attendant.

He wore the conventional garb of the Sons of Ragousa, save that his head was not covered, his hood hanging at his shoulders.

"You will dine?"

"I have dined," said Pawter. "Is the Prior well?"

"Very well, sir. He has been away, but he came back this morning."

He opened a cupboard, took out a decanter, a glass and a large siphon of soda, and placed on the table a big box of cigars.

"You will ring if you require me, sir?" he said, and went out.

Pawter chose a cigar with care, lit it, and, after smoking thoughtfully for a while, he strolled across to the barred window that looked out upon a smaller courtyard. Beyond this, through a big gateway, he saw a flower-grown expanse, with little mounds set at regular intervals, each surmounted by a black cross.

He was trying to analyse the feeling of uneasiness which clouded his mind. It was novel; never before had he felt quite the same as he did to-day. There was something . . . what was it? Could it be William Holbrook's inquisitiveness of the morning? Or was his conscience pricking him, that he had revealed so much that had never been told before about the internal economy of the Proud Sons of Ragousa? Or was it that, stalking in that quiet place was the ghost of Brother John, stricken down in his prime in the crowded streets of London?

"I think I must be getting old," he said to himself as he came back and, pulling up a chair to the table, took from his pocket a number of papers which he had brought with him.

He had hardly begun their examination when there was a gentle knock at the door and a lay brother came in, a red-faced, good-looking man, almost as bald as Pawter.

"They told me you were here," he said, in that low voice which was habitual amongst the people of the Priory. "I thought I'd see you and tell you the news. You know poor Brother John is dead?"

"We only heard to-day, but the Prior has known for some time."

He was the seneschal of the Priory, a man named Blackwood, whom Pawter had known for many years as the head of the laymen. The Ragousas paid their permanent officials well, and Blackwood, who occupied something of the position of housekeeper to the Priors, found the life so much to his liking that he, who had come to what he thought would be a temporary appointment, had held his position for fifteen years. Most of the laymen had been recruited in exactly the same way. Blackwood had been an hotel manager, who had fallen on evil times when the Grand Prior had discovered him. All the gardeners and cooks were chosen from the lodges after a careful inquiry into their qualifications. These laymen were the veritable masters of the Priory, since the Priors themselves had no permanent habitation. Some stayed less than a year and were replaced by fresh appointments.

Nobody except Brother John had remained since the Priors' Degree had been founded.

"Who has Brother John's place?" asked Pawter.

"Brother James, a very quiet and pious man," was the reply. "You come, of course, for the drawing?"

Pawter nodded.

"I wonder they haven't made you a Prior, Blackwood?"

"I prefer my position," he said promptly. "To live apart, to let no man see your face, to speak to none, spend one's time in contemplation—no, thank you!"

"You're a mixed lot," said the irreverent Pawter, pulling at his cigar, and Blackwood smiled.

"There are a few not as great gentlemen as the others," he said diplomatically. "Some of them cannot stand the life, and want to leave at the end of the first week. But they're scared of the Grand Prior. Some would stay for years, and are quite upset when they're turned out to make room for newcomers. Do you know, Mr. Pawter, that I haven't seen a Prior's face all the time I've been here, except one who died?"

"What do you do for a doctor, in case of illness?"

"If a man gets ill he's sent home," said the other. "The only real case of illness we've had was a year ago, when the Grand Prior was seized with a heart attack. Unfortunately, the only man here who can drive a car was ill, and two of the brethren had to go out on to the road in the hope of stopping a car bound for Newton Abbot. By great good luck, they managed to hold a car that was carrying a doctor to Exeter."

"How long ago was this?"

"A year ago."

"You don't happen to know the doctor?"

"No, he was admitted by the Prior's Postern. At that time the Grand Prior was very ill indeed, and on the verge of delirium. It was Brother John who went out to find him. Brother John was beside himself."

"A year ago"—Pawter pinched his lower lip—"and you found a doctor, eh?" He drew a long breath. "That explains a lot—a whole lot."

The seneschal tugged a watch from under his robe.

"You'll have to get ready, sir," he said, opening the cupboard, and took out a silken gown, as Pawter stripped his coat. "You ought to be thankful that you don't have to hide your face either. It must be stifling on a hot night like this. Now I must go. You have everything?"

Pawter walked to the door and watched him go down the passage out of sight, and came back into the room with a new problem to ponder.

It was five minutes to eight o'clock when the summons came. He heard the shuffle of sandalled feet on the stone flooring of the passage, and then a peculiar knock.

"Who knocks?" he asked loudly.

"Two Priors of this Proud Order," came the reply.

"Enter," he said, and the door opened slowly.

Standing in the opening was a masked and cowled figure, its hands concealed in the deep openings of its sleeves. Beyond him was another, similarly attired, and without a word the two men turned and paced leisurely down the corridor, and Pawter followed. When they reached the courtyard where he had got out of the car, there was no sign of any layman. They proceeded along a broad garden path, nodding flowers to left and right, through an archway, up a short flight of steps, and along another path, until they came to the carved door of a building. Here his conductors stood, one on each side, and allowed him to pass.

He was in a small chapel familiar to him. Only the choir was occupied, and in the space where ordinarily worshippers would have knelt or sat, was a big barrel with a handle attached to one end, and a large table piled high with small white, metal-edged discs. His guides passed him, one walking to the right and one to the left, and sat down at the end of the choir stalls.

The mellow light of sunset, streaming through the stained-glass windows, brought a new glory to the banners above the choir, gave a newer dignity to the violet-clad figure which moved down the chancel steps towards him.

"Welcome, O Seen Prior!" said a muffled voice behind

the cowl. "All matters being in order, let the illusion of fortune come to whomsoever chance shall will."

There was a silver gilt shovel like a sugar scoop on the table, and with the aid of this Pawter shovelled the discs into the barrel until every one was inside. Then he clamped tight the lid, and, rolling his sleeve to his right shoulder, held up his bare arm, his fingers outstretched. Then, without a word, he spun the barrel, and, when it stopped, opened a little trap-door in its side, put in his hand and took out a disc, laying it on the table. Ten times he did this, and then the Grand Prior pointed to two of the masked figures in the stalls and they came down to the table, and as one called the numbers the other wrote them down.

When they had finished, Pawter swept the little discs into the palm of his hand and dropped them into the barrel. Again the barrel spun, again he drew forth, one by one, ten numbers, and laid them on the table. The two men who examined the first had returned to their stalls, and now the Prior pointed to two others, who moved forward, called and checked the numbers, and returned to their places.

Five times this happened, and when it was finished, the Grand Prior spoke.

"The fourth drawing is the true drawing, by order of the Priors."

Pawter checked the numbers carefully, and as he was doing so, the Priors rose, a deep voice began the chant of victory, and they filed out one by one.

He frowned. What did that mean? Never before had the Priors left their stalls until the names of the winners had been announced.

As if divining his thoughts, the man in purple spoke.

"It is not seemly that names should be given, for who knows what envy they may excite? And is not envy the very foulest of all human vices? Come with me, my brother, to the registry."

Pawter followed, alert, suspicious.

The registry was a small, lofty room, where, behind

steel doors, were the records of the Order. The only light admitted was through a narrow window placed near the ceiling and heavily barred, and a swinging kerosene lamp supplied the illumination of the apartment. It seemed to Pawter that the lamp was turned unusually low.

"Will you sit on the other side of the table, Mr. Pawter?" said the voice of the masked man courteously.

He turned, opened the safe, and took out, not the books that Pawter expected, the register of names and numbers. Instead, he opened a thin blotter and exposed to the astonished eyes of the auditor five cheques, already filled.

"You will sign these."

"But, Grand Prior," protested Pawter, "I have not checked the names with the numbers. How did you know that those men would win the argosy?"

"You will sign those cheques—please," said the voice again.

"I'll do nothing of the sort," said Pawter, jumping to his feet. "What possesses you, Mr. Stone?"

"There is no name here for me but Grand Prior," he said. "Sign!"

"I'm afraid I cannot." Pawter threw down the pen and moved away from the table.

"If you value your life, sign!"

He turned his head: he was looking into the muzzle of an automatic pistol, and the fire in the eyes that showed through the cowl blazed balefully.

THE GRAND PRIOR SHOWS HIS HAND

"WHAT does this mean?"

"It means that you are going to sign five cheques," was the suave reply. "Or that you will not leave the Priory alive."

Slowly Pawter took off his robe, dropped it on the ground, and thrust his hands into his pockets. Bald, middle-aged, a creature of commerce, he had in him a

something which brought a clearer light to his eye and a more determined thrust to his jaw.

"I'll sign nothing," he said. "You are not Leiff Stone!"

Then, before the other realised what he was doing, Pawter had leapt at the man with the pistol. One hand had gripped the wrist, the other was clawing at the mask on the face, when something struck him and he went down in a heap.

When he came to himself, he was sitting in a smaller and even darker room, on a stone bench. Whatever ventilation there was came through a small grating which showed no light. His wrists were fastened with handcuffs, his ankles were strapped, and somebody was holding him in the angle of the wall.

"Wake up."

He looked stupidly at the purple cowl.

"You're not Leiff Stone," he said drowsily.

"You will be a sensible man and sign the cheques," was the reply.

The Grand Prior was alone, but the heavy door was ajar, and Pawter saw the shadow of a second man in the adjoining room.

"We may have to keep you here for a few days, but I swear that you'll come to no harm if you'll do as you're told."

"I'll sign no cheques," said the other doggedly, "and I warn you that, if you attempt to forge my name, you will be instantly detected. The Prior and I agreed upon a secret marking to every cheque that the bank manager knows. If you're the Prior, you will know what that is."

For a second the man was taken aback.

"I know everything," he said, and then unexpectedly left the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving his prisoner in darkness.

It must have been two hours before he returned. He brought back with him a jug of water, poured out a glassful, and the prisoner drank eagerly.

"Now, Mr. Pawter, you will be a wise man if you will do as I ask. I know the secret mark—a dot under the

vowel of every recipient's name. You are mistaken in thinking that I am not Stone. There is a special reason, which is no business of yours, why I wish to reward these brethren of the Order for their services. There has been a great deal of unrest amongst the brethren, complaints that certain lodges have been favoured at the expense of others. I am merely distributing the argosies over a wider area."

"You do not need a gun for that purpose. Anyway, Prior, I would not have done this thing. You employed me as an auditor for my honesty, and I will not be a party to any crooked practice that you suggest. Bring me the discs and the books, and I will sign the cheques."

Again the purple man went out and came back with ten discs, which he laid on the bench by the side of Pawter.

"Here they are," he said. "I will bring you the books——"

"Save yourself the trouble," said Pawter coldly. "These are not the discs I drew. I have a pretty good head for figures, and I could not possibly have made a mistake. I presume that these discs correspond with the names of the people you wish me to draw the cheques for, and I flatly refuse."

"We will try another method," said the purple man softly. "There is such a thing as pain. If you were a member of the Twenty-Third Degree, you would realise that pain, hunger and thirst are three of the most potent factors in determining human comfort. I will not put you on the rack, or introduce you to The Maiden, Mr. Pawter. A pair of mundane curling tongs such as a wench may use to fringe her hair, heated by a spirit lamp, are quite as painful as any hot iron that might be drawn from a brazier and applied to your eyes! That makes you quiver, my friend! Believe me, I shall not hesitate to go to extreme lengths. Now what do you say?"

"I refuse."

"Very well." The voice came almost in a whisper. "You have brought this upon your own head!"

A TRIP TO DEVON

Betty Carew made a call on the residence of De Fell, the manager, and that young man was not too busy to see the girl to whom he had written on the previous night.

"You've come to accept that part, have you? Well, you can start rehearsals——"

She shook her head with a smile.

"I never dreamt I'd be in a position to do it, Mr. De Fell, but I've got to decline your engagement. I am going with my uncle to America."

"The dickens you are!" said De Fell, swinging round and looking at the girl admiringly. "Does that mean you're out of the theatrical business for good?"

"I don't know. I hope so in many ways, in others I should be very sorry."

"Who is your uncle, by the way?" and, when she told him, he whistled. "Suffering cats! Why, I introduced him to you! Well, now, isn't that fine!"

He had something to say about an old acquaintance of hers.

"You weren't at La Florette's great jamboree last night? Well, you missed nothing except the exhibition of lavish expenditure, for no particular reason so far as I can discover, since Van Campe and I were the only theatrical people present. They say that she has been financed—by the way, what relation is Dr. Laffin to you —uncle?"

"He is not my uncle," she said shortly.

"Then you ought to be thankful. I can't understand that bird. Somebody told me that Laffin was behind this grand display of La Florette's, but I can't believe that. Is he a rich man?"

She shook her head. "He's very poor."

She was loth to discuss the doctor at all, and took the earliest opportunity of bringing the interview to an end. There was another she would gladly have avoided, but Bullott had insisted upon seeing her that afternoon, and

though he had made the environment for the appointment as pleasant as possible—he had chosen Mr. Stone's flat—she went in some apprehension.

Once again she told him of her dreams, of the chapel, the book upon her knees, the monk-like figures sitting beneath their banners, and the purple-robed man who had addressed her.

"That is what I wanted to know," said Bullott at the finish. "You don't remember what happened to the book?"

She shook her head.

"Would you know the place again if you saw it?"

She hesitated.

"Yes, I think I should. Why—do you know where it is? Wasn't it a dream after all?"

"You bet it wasn't!" said Bill Holbrook, an interested audience, energetically. "Miss Carew, the inspector wants you to go down with us to-night."

"Where?" she said in surprise.

"Into Devonshire."

"But I couldn't. Why into Devonshire?"

"My dear, I think you'd better go," said Lambert Stone. "I have heard enough from these gentlemen to be convinced that there is some danger to your father."

"My father!" she gasped. "Whom do you mean?"

"I mean the man in purple."

She looked at him in astonishment.

"You're not jesting?"

"No, that was your father. Mr. Bullott has made inquiries and has discovered that the Grand Priors of Ragousa have their headquarters on Dartmoor."

"Oh!" Suddenly she remembered the adventure that had overtaken her and the doctor nearly two years before. "Now I remember. It was on Dartmoor that we saw those dreadful masked faces, and the voice—the voice of the man who stopped us—it was Brother John!"

Incoherently she related the events of that wild night: the rain, the storm-swept moor, the red lantern in the

road that had brought the car to a standstill, and the long absence of the doctor.

"Yes," nodded Bullott, "you were near the Priory. Someone must have been taken ill there, and the doctor went to see him. It was after that that he got his idea for dressing you up in green and putting you in a shop window—I've got it!" His eyes were blazing with excitement. "Listen—this is what happened. It must have been Leiff Stone who was taken ill, and when the doctor saw him he must have gained his confidence. Your brother is something of a mystic, isn't he, sir?"

Lambert nodded.

"Given to strange dreams?"

"Yes, he always had his visions," said the other quietly.

"Old man Laffin must have heard from him about some dream in which he saw a Messenger from the Absolute—that is the word—in the form of a red-haired girl in a green dress. Perhaps Leiff Stone's dream was that he would meet this girl sitting in a shop window, with a green jade vase and a red rose—can't you imagine what fantastic things he may have dreamt in his delirium? And Laffin thought it over, saw the immense opportunity which this knowledge gave to him, and gradually worked up to the grand climax! Do you remember the advertisement, Holbrook, the advertisement I showed you—'Punging the Green Dragon?' That was Laffin's signal to some confederate, probably in the Priory; somebody who informed him of all Mr. Leiff Stone's movements—he may have got at one of the laymen. At any rate, he induced the Prior to come to London, and pass the store where Miss Carew was working. When Stone had called that part of your work was finished. Laffin had evidently a rôle assigned to you, something referred to in the message which you had given to your father. He intended taking you to the Priory and detaining you in the house for the purpose, and then, when he failed, carried you off from your lodging. Try hard to remember, Miss Carew," he said earnestly, "what did Brother John say to you when he called at the theatre?"

"He asked me if I was the lady who had been in the shop window," she said, "whether I was related to Dr. Laffin."

"Then Brother John knew, or guessed, and he had come to London to protect his friend. And because he was seen speaking to you, they killed him—Laffin or his agent."

He took a sheet of blue paper from his pocket, read it with some satisfaction and put it back.

"I'm taking Laffin to-night," he said.

"On a charge of killing Brother John?" asked Bill.

"No, sir, I am taking him on a charge of wilfully murdering the late Lord Lowbridge by the administration of poison. We've had the body up, and found enough aconite to kill a regiment of soldiers!

"Don't you see," he said, when they had recovered a little from their surprise, "Laffin was the family doctor of the late Lord Lowbridge. Clive Lowbridge had been his pupil, and you might suppose that, with the property in the hands of his friend, it would be an easy matter to get the money he wanted and to hide the fact that, two years before Lord Lowbridge died, Laffin had got transferred, by means of a false deed, a considerable slice of Lord Lowbridge's property. The present holder of the title does not know this, but it is nevertheless a fact that the impoverished condition of his estate is due very considerably to the systematic forgeries of Laffin. The son of Lowbridge died in exactly the same manner—it may be the subject of another charge. Laffin is an expert poisoner, and the sooner we get him the better."

"He is not at his house?" asked Bill in a hushed voice, for this revelation of his friend's prescience almost shocked him.

"No, I have been there. He left very early this morning. I think I know where he is to be found. Now, Miss Carew, will you come?"

"I think I ought to go—for Clive's sake," she said, and Bill Holbrook was instantly and unaccountably depressed.

A MAN AND A MAID

THE five o'clock west-bound mail carried a saloon in which were fifteen men and one woman, who did not usually undertake a journey to the West of England. Bullott was taking no chances. He had been allowed to select his own posse, and when, at eight o'clock that night, they reached Newton Abbot, he was confident that, whatever the search of the Priory might produce, he would not fail through lack of able assistance.

Four big cars left at intervals for Two Bridges, partly because this made a convenient halting-place, and partly by reason of Bullott's knowledge that Pawter usually spent the night at the hotel when his duties brought him to the Priory.

The first car carried Betty and her uncle, with Bill Holbrook, Inspector Bullott, and a detective at the driver's side.

"I'm beginning to get thrilled," she said in a low voice, as the car came down to Buckfastleigh-in-the-Moor, and the severe splendour of the new Abbey showed for a second in the paling light. "And you are also, Mr. Holbrook—you've spoken hardly a word since we left town."

"No." Bill roused himself with an effort. "I've got a thinking fit to-day. When are you leaving?"

"On Saturday," she said. "I'm looking forward to that trip tremendously. The *Escorial* is the biggest ship in the new American line, isn't it, Mr. Stone?"

"The biggest and the best," he said stoutly. "We're going to show these Europeans that we can run ships as well as the best organisations in England or Germany."

He spoke of the great social halls, of the swimming-pool, the wonderful suites, the Florentine restaurant and the palm court, and Bill grew more dismal in inverse ratio to his companion's enthusiasm.

"Why don't you come along? I'm making up a party for my camp in the Adirondacks."

Bill sighed heavily.

"Get thee behind me, Lambert Stone," he groaned.

"Why don't you come, Mr. Holbrook?" asked Betty, to her uncle's surprise. "You were one of the first people Mr. Stone suggested, but I—I thought you wouldn't like to join us."

"Who's going?" asked Bill, and the first name damped any enthusiasm that was developing. "You'll enjoy it, anyway," he said. "We're getting near Two Bridges," with this he abruptly turned the subject.

The car pulled up before the hotel and Bullott went to see Pawter. He came out very shortly afterwards, and in his voice was a note of concern.

"Pawter hasn't returned," he said. "They say he is usually back by half-past nine, and it's past ten now."

"He isn't that much behind his time that you need worry," said Stone. "What do you intend doing—I mean, what is the object of raiding the Priory?"

"Primarily to take a good look at the gentlemen who are in control," said Bullott. "I wish to satisfy myself that Mr. Leiff Stone is what he appears to be—the head of a perfectly harmless organisation."

Lambert Stone was looking at him intently.

"That isn't your object, Mr. Bullott," he said quietly, "there is some other reason. My brother would not be a party to any illegal practices. Do you think that the Order has got into the hands of lawless men and that he is there too?"

"I think a good many things. I am scared about more," he said.

The half-hour that followed afforded two members of the party an opportunity which one at least desired. Bill had strolled a little way along the dark road when he heard footsteps behind him, and, turning, discerned the figure of the girl.

"Mr. Holbrook," she called, "I want to speak to you. Have I offended you?"

"Offended me?" said Bill in amazement. "Why, no, Miss Carew."

"Or is it your natural repugnance to compromise?"

He did not see her smile, but he heard the laughter in her voice.

"You aren't very friendly, are you? I remember not so long ago, when I walked a long way to avoid you. I am more shameless now. Are you very angry with me?"

"Why should I be?"

"Why won't you come to America? My uncle would have really liked to ask you; it was I who stopped him writing you an invitation. You see, Mr. Holbrook," she said as she walked by his side, "I was rather scared of you; I couldn't understand what part you were playing in that horrible scheme to put me in a shop window, and I told Clive——"

"Shall we leave Lord Lowbridge out of account?" he said, with inexplicable exasperation.

"You don't like Lord Lowbridge?"

"I like him all right," said Bill. "I'm sorry I was so irritable."

"Why don't you like him?" she insisted.

"I don't know. Does anybody like the perfect man—any other man, I mean?"

He heard her soft laughter and grinned a little sheepishly.

"You're jealous!"

The astounding charge took his breath away.

"Jealous?" he stammered. "What do you mean? How can I be jealous?"

"You're jealous," she said again, "that is, if you're human."

He had no words to answer her.

"I've been on the stage—lived in an atmosphere where love and infatuation and the other pleasant mysteries of life are discussed so naturally and so persistently that even I can discuss them without—without embarrassment. A woman loses a great deal when she becomes sophisticated, but she gains in knowledge. Mr. Holbrook, you're falling in love, and you mustn't!"

Never before in his life had he felt at such a disadvantage, so incapable of pert rejoinder. She was telling

him something that consciously he had not known.

"Why mustn't I?" he said. His voice was husky as he went on quickly, "Of course, I know you're frantically rich, and you're in love with another man, but they're the merest items, and anyway, there's nothing to prevent my loving you—if I want."

"Except that I'm married," she said.

He stopped dead.

"To Lowbridge?" he asked, scarcely recognising his own voice.

"No, to Dr. Laffin. I think you ought to know this. I am married in the sense that I have been through a ceremony before the registrar. I don't know why he did it, but—yes, I do."

"Does Mr. Stone know?"

"No," she said in a low voice, "I do not wish him to know—yet."

They were nearing the hotel again when he halted.

"Suppose you weren't married?" he asked, and it required all his courage to put the question. "Would that make a whole lot of difference to—to me, or to Lowbridge?"

"Let us go in," she said, turning. "I thought I heard the inspector call."

But he would not move.

"To whom would this make most difference?"

"To both of you, I think," she said lightly, and then her arm was in his. "I shall never marry Clive," she said.

THE TEST

PAWTER looked at the phosphorescent dial of his watch and with some difficulty returned it to his pocket, for the handcuffs about his wrists were of a type that he had never seen before. He suspected that they had been found in the monastery, and remembered the Grand Prior telling him, many years before, that he had discovered a cell evidently used to incarcerate monks who had lost

their reason. He was probably in that prison house now.

What would they do with him? Would the purple-veiled Prior carry his threat into execution? It was more than an hour since the man had taken his departure, and there had been no sign or sound of him.

There were two doors in the small stone room in which he was held prisoner, and in spite of his bound ankles he had succeeded in hopping to both, to find, as he had expected, that they were locked. He had scarcely put away his watch before he heard the shooting of bolts, the door opened and the purple man came in, carrying a candle lantern, which he placed on the floor. By its side he put a flat metal case, which he opened, and Pawter saw, with some astonishment, that his captor literally intended to fulfil his threat, for he took out a diminutive spirit stove and a pair of steel tongs.

He struck a match, and the stove burnt bluely. Then, laying the tongs on two projecting brackets, he watched the steady flame curl about the steel.

"It will take a little time before they are hot enough," said the voice, "time for you to reflect, my friend."

He went out of the room and returned with the coat which Pawter had taken off when he had put on his robe.

"Our good friend Blackwood was curious as to where you had gone." He mentioned the fact casually.

"What are you going to do?" There was no tremor in Pawter's voice when he put the question. And then:

"Hurt you," was the calm reply, "hurt you so badly that you will do as I wish."

"In other words, you're going to revert to the practice of the Middle Ages, eh?" Pawter was calm, almost bland. "It has been a wonder to me how these ancient folk endured torture, and now I'm going to discover for myself!"

"That is exactly what will happen," said the mask. "You have lived a fairly comfortable life, Mr. Pawter, maintained yourself free from aches and pains, and I doubt very much whether you can imagine what will happen when real pain, comes to you."

"I can imagine a whole lot of things," said Pawter, watching the blue flame of the spirit lamp, "but I can't imagine making myself a party to your fraud by signing those cheques."

The Prior lifted the tongs, held them near to his face, and put them back again in the flames.

"Not hot enough yet," he said pleasantly. "Pawter, you're a fool. I am willing to pay you a very considerable sum for your services, and to continue that payment every half-year. You would be a rich man in five years' time."

"I'm a rich man now," said the other easily, "and if I did what you ask me, my riches would weight me down and crush me."

At the end of five minutes, during which time neither man spoke, the Prior lifted the tongs.

"They are hot," he said, and brought them near to Pawter's face, but the bald man did not shrink.

Nearer and nearer, until the heat was intolerable, and yet, with an unbelievable stoicism, he sat rigid, unmoving.

"Not pleasant, eh? Imagine them held to your eyelids —that makes you feel bad? Listen." The spurious amiability left his voice. "There's nothing I will not do to make you carry out my wishes. I'll blind you—do you understand that? I'll shut off from you the chief joy of life—your vision! Am I to be checked at the moment of my success by a dog of a tradesman?"

His voice rose shrilly, the hands that held the tongs were trembling.

"At the very edge of fortune, shall I hesitate——"

Rap, rap, rap.

Somebody was knocking at the door. He half turned.

"Who's there?" he called.

Rap, rap, rap!

"Who is it?" The man in purple almost screamed the question.

"Open, in the name of the King!" said a voice on the other side of the door—the voice of Inspector Bullott!

THE door shook under a heavy blow, and the Prior stood momentarily paralysed with terror and consternation.

"Open!"

Pawter too had recognised the voice of Inspector Bullott, and he drew a long sigh. In another second the Prior had lifted the lantern and blown out the light; there was the rattle of a key in a door, and a sound of creaking hinges; then followed a thud, as the door closed.

He was escaping through the smaller door, and he had hardly left the room before Pawter heard the sound of voices outside, the snap of a lock, and in another instant Bullott had dashed into the room, an electric torch in his hand.

"Where is he?" he asked.

Pawter nodded towards the small postern.

"Is there a key to this?" cried Bullott sharply.

Blackwood came into the cell, bearing a bunch of keys, his red face unusually pale. Five minutes were lost before the key was discovered. Bullott then found himself in a smaller stone lobby. From this led a door, which when it was opened, he discovered to be the postern gate through which the Grand Prior was admitted to the building. There was no sign of the man, nor was a search possible, for it opened on to the wild moor, now in complete darkness, and it would have required a battalion to have continued the search.

The inspector returned to the Priory and conducted a close examination of the priors. He came to the room into which Pawter had been ushered, with a story of failure.

"The Grand Prior and Brother James have gone," he said, "and whoever the Prior may be, he is not Leiff Stone!"

Seeing that a search that night would be wasted labour, Bullott returned to the room which had been allotted to Pawter. Here he interrupted the publicity man in the midst of his recital. A further and more systematic search

of the Priory led to no discovery of value, and at one o'clock in the morning the search party was withdrawn, to the relief of the ruffled Priors.

"I don't know what action the Secretary of State will take now that this matter of the draw has been brought to his notice," said Bullott, "but I suggest, Mr. Pawter, that until you learn the wishes of the members of your Order, you had better take up the duties of the Chief Prior."

To his surprise, Pawter offered no objection to adopting this course, for apparently he had already decided what action he would take.

"I don't suppose for one moment that our friend will return," he said, "but if he does, I can promise you that I will place him immediately in your hands. As to taking control of the Order, that has already been provided for. I have a deed signed by Mr. Stone, authorising me to take charge if anything happened to him."

"Did you recognise his voice?"

Pawter shook his head.

"No, though I'll swear it was not Mr. Stone."

Blackwood, the seneschal, was closely questioned, and added something to the detective's knowledge. He remembered the night that Betty had been brought to the Priory, though he swore that she had not come through the main gates. The other Priors were unanimous that she had come there of her own free will, a pardonable error, for she had, apparently, walked to her chair unassisted; they had not been informed as to the meaning of the strange scene they had witnessed. All they knew was that the Grand Prior had addressed them an hour before the girl was brought in, and had told them that he was receiving a "divine visitor." Nor did they know who were the two brethren who had stood on either side of her when the book was placed upon her knees. As to the book, that was as much of a mystery to them as it had been to the girl.

The Grand Prior was in the building the next morning. He seldom journeyed by day, left as a rule just before

midnight, and drove his own car, which was kept in a small garage that had been built on the north side of the Priory wall.

Bullott went to inspect this building, and found, as he had expected, that it was empty. Further, the seneschal could not assist them, for he seldom saw the Prior himself except on extraordinary occasions, and he did not know how many days the head of the Order had been at the Priory before the startling events of that night.

The party drove back the way they had come, and nearing Two Bridges, Pawter, who accompanied them, remembered the old waiter who had a cottage on the moor.

"That must be the place," he said, pointing to the little dwelling, visible in the light of the motor lamps.

As the car stopped before the door, it opened and Pawter saw the servant. He was a little tremulous at sight of so many people at such an hour of the night, but he had a tale to tell of a machine that had dashed past an hour before.

"A big black car with three men, and going at such a rate that I thought they'd turn over at the curve. I think they must have had an accident, because I heard the brakes go on, and a bump."

Beyond the cottage the road turned abruptly, and here there was a wall which showed marks of collision.

"It wasn't serious enough to stop them," said Bullott after making his inspection. "Those were our men undoubtedly."

A police patrol whom they met near Two Bridges had the same story to tell of a car that was thundering along the road in defiance of all speed regulations.

"I signalled them to stop, but they took no more notice of me than if I'd been a fly on the wall," he said.

"Any number on the car?" asked Bullott hopefully.

"No, sir, they had no back light so far as I could see. They took the Exeter road."

"I'll get on the 'phone to the Exeter police," said Bullott, after they had gained admission to the hotel, but in this project he was not successful. The wires which

followed the Exeter road had been cut, and there was no other telephonic communication.

In point of fact the big black car did not take the risk of being observed in a fairly populous city where it must go at a slow pace. Five miles from the suburbs of Exeter, Joshua Laffin leant across to the driver and bawled in his ear:

"Keep away from Exeter. There's a by-road to the left that takes you past Taunton."

Captain Harvey Hale waved his hand, not taking his eyes from the road ahead.

At eight o'clock that morning Dr. Laffin arrived at Bath Station, caught the early train, and was in his home before eleven o'clock. Detectives watching the house saw him come, and duly reported his arrival to Bullott, but long before the inspector was on the spot, Mr. William Holbrook was knocking at the front door, which was opened by Laffin's servant.

"The master is busy," she said.

"I'm busy too," said Bill, and pushed past her.

Without a word he turned the handle of the study door, threw it open and walked inside. The room was, as usual, heavily curtained, and the only light was a candle upon the table. Dr. Laffin was nowhere to be seen.

"I thought he was there, sir," said the girl, aghast. "He must be in his room. I'll run up."

She came down in a few minutes with the news that the doctor was not in the house.

As he stood there, the area door below opened and an elderly woman in an old mantle, and carrying a big milk jug and a key in her hand, came out, shuffled down the path and turned towards the station. It was apparently Laffin's cook. He saw the two detectives watching on the opposite side of the road, and knew there was no chance of the man escaping. Turning to the girl, who was standing aimlessly in the passage, he asked:

"What time did the doctor come back?"

"About ten o'clock, sir. I told him the police were coming here——"

"You told him that, did you?"

"Oh yes, sir, they quite frightened me. There have been two men watching this house all the morning and all last night. I got so nervous that I nearly went home to my mother."

"But why do that?" said Bill good-humouredly. "Surely the cook is some sort of protection, isn't she?"

"Cook, sir?" said the girl in surprise. "We haven't got a cook. I do all the cooking there is."

"But who's the elderly woman in the kitchen downstairs?"

She shook her head.

"There isn't any elderly woman, sir. We have a charwoman in once a week, but this is not her day."

A sudden suspicion shot through Holbrook's mind, and he ran out of the front door, down into the street, and gazed the way the old woman had gone. It was at that moment that Bullott arrived, and the reporter told him what he had seen.

"That was Laffin all right," said Bullott. "He walked into the trap, and we hadn't sufficient intelligence to close it on him."

He called the two watchers and gave them instructions. In ten minutes all West London was looking for an elderly woman carrying a milk jug and a key.

Lord Lowbridge heard the news with a grave face.

"Impossible!" he said when they told him that Laffin was wanted for murder by poisoning. "My uncle died a natural death."

"Who gave the certificate?" asked Bullott significantly, and Clive Lowbridge stared.

"I never thought of that. Of course, Dr. Laffin gave the certificate. But it is too preposterous—what could he hope to gain?"

"He could hope to make you a very rich man and trust that your generosity would reward him. He hoped also to hide the fact, which would have been discovered by Lord Lowbridge, and certainly should have been discovered by his lawyers, that a large parcel of land had been trans-

ferred to Laffin by means of forged deeds. In other words, my lord, Dr. Laffin is partly responsible for the poverty of your estate!"

Clive's jaw dropped.

"It is incredible," he muttered. And then, aloud, "I have never cared very much for Laffin, although I thought I owed him something, and probably your view as to what would have happened if I had inherited a large fortune is nearly accurate. As a matter of fact, I had decided in my mind to give the doctor a very substantial sum. He was always in debt, and generally in the worst kind of other trouble; it would have been a real pleasure to me to have relieved that state of affairs for him. And my cousin, too, you say?" He whistled. "It sounds like a page of an exciting novel, but I must believe you. Laffin is not like other men; his virtues and vices are equally bizarre."

"Did he ever introduce you to the Proud Sons of Ragousa?"

"No, he never succeeded in shooting me into that crowd," he said, "but it was not for want of trying. But that sort of mummery does not appeal to me, and my luck is so diabolical that I could never hope to have gained one of their big prizes. They give some prizes, don't they? In fact"—there was a note of unhappiness in his laughter—"the biggest prize in all the world, which most men would have thought was easiest to gain, has so far escaped me—and it isn't money."

FLORETTE COMPLAINS

Bill was in his room shaving late in the morning, when Bullott rushed in.

"I've got a bit of news that will interest you, Holbrook," he said. "There were three people in that car that left Exeter; I've been able to trace them. The driver was a tall man, who will be difficult to identify because his face was covered with goggles, but he is, I believe, Captain Harvey Hale, a man who has been in prison, and

a pretty bad character. The second man was, of course, Joshua Laffin."

"And the third?" asked Bill.

"I'll give you three guesses."

"Not Toby Marsh?" said Holbrook.

"Toby Marsh and no other," said Bullott. "I've been to his lodgings to make absolutely sure, but he hasn't been there since last night. He was riding with Laffin, and the two were seen talking very confidentially by a policeman as they came into Bath, where the car was garaged at the Hudson Hotel. This confirms the story of the Taunton police and the waiter at Two Bridges, who say there were two men beside the driver."

"Toby Marsh!" Holbrook was bewildered.

"If I have failed it is my own fault," said Bullott despondently. "Those gay writers in the newspapers said I was a fool to take this little thief into my confidence—and they are more than justified. Now that it is too late, I have discovered that Laffin and Marsh were old acquaintances. The only conviction that the police have against Marsh is for breaking and entering Laffin's place in Bath. I've been looking at the records of the case, and the story is a simple one. Laffin was, as usual, in a state of poverty, but had some valuable books and old Egyptian manuscripts, which he had insured heavily. The story Marsh told was that he was an acquaintance of Laffin's, and had been employed by him to commit the burglary with the object of getting the insurance, though the Egyptian papyri were subsequently proved to be practically valueless. Naturally, nobody believed the burglar against a respected local doctor, and Toby was sent down, swearing he would get even with the man who double-crossed him."

"But why should Marsh have given us all this information about Laffin?"

"Partly for revenge," said Bullott, "partly, and in the latter stages of the case, to pull the wool over our eyes, or, to put it vulgarly, to kid us along. No, we've been sold. There's no sense in squealing. Are you going with

the Stones to America?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly.

Bill shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said, without heartiness. "In fact, I know I shan't. You seem to forget that I'm on this story of Laffin——"

"I should go if I were you"—Bullott interrupted him —"because I am!"

"You?"

"Yes, I've seen the Chief this morning, and he has decided that I ought to join the party. Do you know what relation Betty Carew is to the doctor?"

Bill was silent.

"That young lady is going to be the candle to the moth. She is the one assistant Laffin can depend upon, unwilling though she may be; for by the law she cannot give evidence against her husband. He married her to silence her; there is an excellent reason—two excellent reasons, in fact—why he should follow her to America."

"They may be excellent," said Bill, "but they don't appear that way to me. Besides, I've got another anchor in London. Pips has taken on the reconstruction of the Proud Sons of Ragousa. Maybe there'll be no Proud Sons to reconstruct after the Secretary of State has taken action. If it isn't reconstructed it will be wound up, and Pips will be busy. I cannot let his business go to ruin."

"Nevertheless, you will be well advised to come along with me," said Bullott.

"Where is Leiff Stone?" asked Bill.

"God knows," was the grave reply. "I haven't dared to tell Miss Stone all that I suspect."

Bill Holbrook did not see him for the rest of the day; he himself was fully occupied with putting into writing the story of the raid on the Priory, and in consultation with Pawter. That worthy man had lost no time in seeing the high officers of state, and had exposed to them all that he knew of the workings of the Order.

"They have no objection to our carrying on, but they insist that the Priors shall not be masked, and that the

annual distribution of argosies must be determined by merit and not by chance."

"That sounds as though most of the money will come to me," said Bill.

For some reason the depression which had laid on his mind like a cloud during the past few weeks had vanished, and he could trace his relief and cheerfulness to the talk he had had with the girl on the Dartmoor road.

Toward the evening, when he was working at the newspaper office, the City Editor brought him news that the body of Tinker Lane had been found, and later came a prosaic reminder of his own responsibility in the matter, in the shape of a policeman bearing an order to appear before the coroner's inquest.

Every tape message that reached the office concerning Laffin was brought to him, for now the news that the man was wanted for murder was common property. A reward had been offered for his arrest; every station and port was being watched; but Laffin had disappeared, and though a taxicab driver had been found who had picked up the old woman with the milk jug and the key and had set her down near a City hospital, he was not able to contribute any helpful clue.

It was eleven o'clock at night, and he had handed in his last copy and risen stiffly from his desk, when the bell of the inter-telephone rang and the hall porter told him that there was a lady to see him. His heart jumped.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Miss Florette, sir."

"Show her up."

To say that La Florette was in a state of agitation is mildly to describe the half-hysterical, half-furious woman who was shown into his little office. Florette spent a considerable time every day in hiding the traces by which ruthless nature scores the passage of the years, but tonight she had made no attempt to doll up, Bill noticed. Her face was haggard, and the dark lines about her eyes revealed the state of mind into which Laffin's perfidy had thrown her.

"Has that devil been found?" she asked immediately she came into the room. "Oh, Mr. Holbrook, isn't it dreadful! All I've had from him was five hundred, though he promised faithfully he'd send me a cheque the next morning! I haven't seen the colour of his money, and the tradesmen's bills are coming in; it will cost me over two thousand to settle! And it was Van Campe's fault; he said I'd get publicity out of it, and I haven't got so much as a line! Whatever am I to do?"

"If you'll sit down quietly and tell me all about it," said Bill, "maybe I can help you—as far as publicity goes."

"Not that kind of publicity," she said shrilly. "I don't want anybody to know that it wasn't my house, or that somebody else was paying the bills! It would ruin me professionally, Mr. Holbrook. I've got to think of my career. And Charles says that he won't pay a penny. I'm ruined, absolutely ruined!"

Bill looked at the ten thousand dollar wristlet she wore, was dazzled by the scintillations of a great, pear-shaped diamond that hung on her breast, and even observed that the hands that gesticulated in despair sent forth strange and beautiful flashes of colour, and in the face of this evidence of "ruin" was not as sympathetic as he might have been.

"It's not my house at all," she said; "of course you knew that? Laffin took it because he wanted to find out something about Sir Richard Paxton, who is one of the heads of the Treasury. I don't understand very much about it, because Stock Exchange business makes my head ache. But it was all about the war that he wanted to know. It seems that we owe America a lot of money."

"Have you only just discovered that?" asked Bill with gentle irony.

"How was I to know?" she asked impatiently. "Anyway, we *do* owe America a lot of money, and we have to pay them every year or half-year—I forget which. And he wanted me to find out when the next interest—that was the word, 'interest'—was to be paid. He said that the

British Government had been buying dollars, and he wanted to make sure whether the money was going to America in paper currency or in gold, and I had an awful job to find out, Mr. Holbrook. You've no idea how mean these Government people are. And Sir Richard likes me very much indeed—in fact, he's perfectly dippy about me."

Bill was listening with all ears now. The mystery of the house in Portman Place was less of a mystery to him.

"I suppose it was because I had this grand house that he was more open and frank with me. It's curious what snobs people are—but they are, Mr. Holbrook! Anyway, he told me that the money was being sent in paper currency—that's the term, isn't it? paper currency?"

"That's the term," said Bill, with an assumption of carelessness. "And when is it to be shipped?"

"On the twenty-ninth of July—that's next week—by the——" she frowned in an effort of memory. "I can never keep ships in my head—it was a curious name——"

"*Escorial?*" asked Bill, his heart beating a little faster.

"That's it—the *Escorial*. Fifty million dollars! Isn't it wicked to send all that money to America? They'll probably spend it on cinemas, which are ruining our profession. Fifty million dollars!" She literally groaned. "And I've got twenty tradesmen waiting on my doorstep, and heaven knows where the money's coming from! I've never been so deceived in my life, Mr. Holbrook. He ought to get twenty years for what he did for me. Is there any chance of finding him?" she asked.

"The police are trying very hard to find him."

"Has he any money? I mean, would it be possible, if he is captured, for him to give me a cheque?" she whimpered. "I'm sure the police would think all the better of him if he paid his obligations. I don't know which way to turn, and mother's so upset because her paying guest has gone away, and the police have been to the house looking for him. Really, Mr. Holbrook, I think I shall go mad unless something happens."

"One moment," said Bill. "Did you tell Dr. Laffin all that Sir Richard Paxton told you—I mean, about the money going on the *Escorial?*"

She noded vigorously.

"Of course I did; I told him on Sunday night, just as soon as Sir Richard told me. There wasn't anything wrong in that, was there?" she asked in sudden alarm.

"I don't know what view the police will take of it," said Bill gravely, and La Florette went white.

"Has he been doing something very wrong?"

"I don't think he could do anything much worse than murder, and you know they want him for that," said Bill, a little irritably.

"Yes, I know, but has he been stealing money?" asked Florette, to whom the first letter of sin was "$."

He got rid of her as soon as he possibly could, promising to give her the first news of Laffin's capture, and to inform her at the earliest possible date as to the doctor's financial position. He himself left the office a few minutes after La Florette, and, since his mind needed the sedative of exercise, he decided to walk home.

He strolled leisurely up Fleet Street, along the Strand, still bright and populated, for the great hotels had not yet discharged their supper parties; crossed Trafalgar Square, and, acting upon the whim of the moment, turned under the Admiralty Arch and walked along the Mall. At this hour of the night, even the courting couples had disappeared, and beyond the cars and cabs that take a short cut to Victoria, there was little to be seen.

He saw no pedestrians until he overtook a man who was walking slowly towards Buckingham Palace. Something in his gait seemed familiar, and yet he would not have troubled to look into the face, but just as he was abreast of the solitary walker the man gave a short, dry cough, and Bill spun round. For a second only he was in doubt: the sallow face and the short-clipped, black beard were wholly unfamiliar to him. The horn-rimmed spectacles that surmounted the thin nose were equally strange. He hesitated, facing the man.

"What do you want?" said the voice, and that was his mistake.

In an instant Bill Holbrook had gripped him.

"I want you, Dr. Laffin!" he said.

His free hand tore away the beard that hid the cruel mouth. The doctor winced with the pain of it; then without a word, he struck out. His blow caught Holbrook unprepared, and he stumbled backwards, but before Laffin could run, Bill had reached out and caught his coat. For a second they struggled desperately, and then over the man's shoulder he saw a policeman approaching from the direction of St. James's.

Laffin's strength was extraordinary, he fought like a cat, striking out wildly, and wherever his blow fell Bill grunted with the shock of it. And then, as the policeman came up, occurred a maddening accident which was to have such remarkable consequences.

Laffin's fist had struck Bill full in the mouth. Savagely he hit back; the doctor dodged, and the blow, going across his shoulder, caught the policeman under the jaw and sent him sprawling. In a second he was on his feet, had torn the men apart, flinging the doctor against the railings of the Park and holding Bill in a grip from which there was no escape.

"Take that man, quick! He's Laffin!" gasped the reporter.

"I'll take you," said the officer savagely, and swung him round. "Come a little walk with me!"

"Take him, take him!" yelled Bill, as he saw Laffin, turning on his heel, run like the wind. "He's wanted for murder!"

AN ADDITIONAL PASSENGER

THE grip on collar and arm did not relax.

"I'll teach you to hit me!" breathed the officer.

"It was an accident, you fool!" stormed Bill, making the situation worse. "Take that man—he's Laffin, I tell

you. They'll have the coat off your back if you let him escape!"

"Never mind about Laffin; I've heard that fairy tale before," said the policeman, as he walked briskly, Bill's arm in his, past the sentry at St. James's Palace.

There was nothing to do but to submit, and Bill Holbrook found himself thrust into a steel pen, answering the conventional questions of the station sergeant. When they had been put:

"I want you to communicate with Inspector Bullott," said Bill, giving the address. "He's a personal friend of mine. I tell you, the man that this officer allowed to escape was Joshua Laffin, who is wanted on a charge of murder."

The sergeant looked across his spectacles.

"Is that so?" he said, with polite sarcasm. "And is there anybody else you'd like to communicate with? The King or anybody?"

"Do you mind telephoning my newspaper?" said Bill, who knew that it would be a waste of time trying to match his wits with the officer. "Perhaps you'll not be so comic to-morrow morning."

A claim of association with a newspaper was more effective than his statement that he was a friend of Bullott. But, by extraordinary bad luck, there was no member of the night staff who knew him. The City Editor had gone home, and the men on duty were strangers to him; and when he had at last persuaded the sergeant to communicate with Bullott, it was to discover that that officer also was not at home.

He spent the night in a police cell, and at ten o'clock the next morning was brought before the magistrate charged with disorderly conduct and striking Police Constable Higgins in the execution of his duty. It was so ludicrous, so amazingly grotesque an experience, that he did not know whether to laugh or cry when the magistrate inflicted a small fine, and he almost ran out of the court.

A taxi took him to his lodgings, and he found the in-

spector's housekeeper scrubbing the front passage.

"Mr. Bullott, sir? Didn't you know that he was leaving?"

"Leaving—for where?"

"For America, sir, he went this morning."

"Is it Saturday?" said Bill in horror.

"Of course it is, sir." She looked at him suspiciously; she had never before seen this untidy young man under the influence of drink. "Mr. Bullott was very worried about your not coming home last night; he wanted to see you and left a note in your room."

"That's all right, I was locked up," said Bill recklessly, and dashed up the stairs to find the letter.

It was a very short note, but significant.

"If it is humanly possible for you to join the *Escorial,* do so. Something very queer is happening."

That was all—it was a message without introduction, date or signature, scribbled hastily in pencil. Did Bullott know about the Treasury official's indiscretion? Did he realise that the *Escorial* was carrying fifty million dollars in paper currency to New York? Bill's head was in a whirl. He sat down and tried hard to think consecutively. The thought uppermost in his mind was that some extraordinary danger threatened Betty Carew.

He looked at his watch; it was eleven o'clock. On Saturday there would be nobody in the office, but he knew where to find the editor, and in a few minutes was on the 'phone to him, telling him what he had learnt on the previous night. The editor made a quick decision.

"I'll fix the police," he said. "Go along to the American Consul, explain the position to him, and get your passport visaed. I'll have reservations made for you on the ship by wireless. What time does the *Escorial* sail?"

"At midday; it will leave in an hour," said Bill.

"I'll hire a car to take you to Southampton," came the instructions, "and will wire the seaplane company to have a machine waiting to carry you to Cherbourg. Fly

over to France and pick up the *Escorial;* she'll not leave Cherbourg before six o'clock to-night. Have you got any money?"

"No, sir," said Bill promptly.

"Very good, I'll send my butler along with the car and the cash; he'll meet you outside the Consulate."

The Consulate was closing when he arrived. The Consul, indeed, had already taken his departure, and it seemed impossible that the all-important visa could be obtained. Nevertheless, visa or no visa, Bill Holbrook was determined that he would make the trip. The most they could do would be to turn him back from New York, and he thought he had influences sufficiently strong in that city to find his way into his native land without making acquaintance with Ellis Island. Happily, this unsatisfactory course was not necessary, for, after a telephone consultation with his chief, the Assistant Consul was able to stamp his passport, and by the time this business was through, and Bill had emerged on to Bedford Square, he found the editor's servant waiting with a roll of money. And at the sidewalk was the car that the editor had hired.

At half-past three that afternoon he arrived at Southampton, to learn that the *Escorial* had sailed promptly at midday, and would arrive at Cherbourg at six o'clock that night. It took him a longer time than he supposed to find the headquarters of the seaplane company, and it was nearly five before, with a thundering roar of her tractors, the little plane rose steeply from the water, and, mounting higher and higher, headed for Cherbourg. Midway the engine began to misfire, and the pilot was forced to bring her down on to the water, which fortunately was smooth. Another half-hour was wasted whilst he corrected the error which had led to the forced landing.

Bill was in that agony of fear and anger which is only experienced by those who find themselves held up when they are late for an appointment. But at last the repairs were completed and the seaplane buzzed up again, and as his watch pointed to half-past seven they sighted the

French coast and presently the huge bulk of the *Escorial*.

Even as the ship came into sight, he saw a white feather of steam shoot out from her siren, and knew that she was signalling her departure. Down swept the plane, coming to rest within a fathom of the high hull, just as the gangway was being pulled up from the tender.

Bill signalled frantically, and, at the imminent risk of his life, walked the somewhat precarious foothold of the seaplane's float, and, barely managing to reach the bulwarks of the tender, swung himself aboard. The gangway was up, but he was evidently expected, for a pilot ladder was dropped immediately, and, clinging desperately to the rope, he reached one of the lower decks and was hauled on board.

It was not until then that he realised that he had left his bag on the seaplane, but somehow this did not worry him greatly. Within a few yards of him was, as he knew, Betty Carew, and that was compensation enough.

ON BOARD THE "ESCORIAL"

"You cut it rather fine."

Bill looked round and gripped the hand of Bullott.

"The purser told me he'd had your wire, but we'd given you up. Our stay at Cherbourg was shorter than usual, and you were lucky to make it."

They went down to the purser's office together, and Bill received the steamship ticket, which had been ordered by wireless, and was shown to a small cabin on one of the upper decks.

In greater detail than was usual with him, he told the story of La Florette's visit and his subsequent misadventure.

"You're sure it was Laffin?"

"Certain," said Bill emphatically. "I knew him even with his beard on. Once that was off, he made no disguise of his identity. If that blundering idiot of a policeman hadn't pinched me, I'd have had him under lock and key."

Bullott looked thoughtfully at the new passenger.

"I don't think they'll make any attempt to get the money—which is on board, by the way—until they get to New York. At any rate, the captain and the ship's officers know that there is some possibility of the strong-room being forced, and they've put a couple of armed guards before the purser's safe."

"Is it in an inaccessible place?" asked Bill.

"No, as a matter of fact, it is behind the purser's cabin, and the only possible way in which it can be forced is through that apartment. This, of course, is not the strong-room in which the money would be stored if it were in bullion: there's a bigger vault down below. But as the payment is made in paper, the purser's own deposit is considered to be the best possible place for it. Day and night there is somebody on duty; the purser himself sleeps in a berch which covers the door; and in addition, there are two armed quartermasters on duty."

"There are no suspicious characters amongst the passengers?"

"It is too early to say that," said Bullott. "With eleven hundred fashionable and semi-fashionable folk in the first and second class, it is quite possible that we shall find a few who wouldn't be qualified if we were choosing archbishops. There are, for instance, eight known card-sharpers working the line, and probably as many more who are unknown. But the purser and the ship's police are certain that these men are not in any way dangerous. They specialise in their own graft and have no time for sidelines. Do you know the ship? She's wonderful!"

"A newspaper man knows everything," said Bill.

BETTY'S FEAR

LATER, he was to find that Mr. Bullott's enthusiastic description was by no means far-fetched. The United States liner *Escorial* was by far the most luxurious vessel that ever rode the Atlantic. Never had the easy descrip-

tion of "floating palace" been so truthful in its application. From the gymnasium on the upper deck to the pillared swimming pool on H deck, she was the last word in magnificent accommodation. Ten elevators carried her passengers from deck to deck: her huge social hall, with its priceless tapestries and its elegant furnishings, was without a peer. Bill paced the long promenade deck, his eyes seeking for Betty Stone, and marvelled at the hugeness of this leviathan.

The spacious deck was crowded with loungers, for the dinner bugle had not yet sounded. He searched the rows upon rows of deck chairs that stood in the deep recesses, without, however, catching so much as a glimpse of the girl, and when he joined Bullott in the beautiful smoke-room, he mentioned the failure of his search.

"Miss Stone is unpacking: I just saw her maid. There's Lowbridge." He pointed to a padded corner of the room where Clive Lowbridge sat at his ease, a cigarette between his lips, his eyes on the carved ceiling. Their eyes met, and with a lift of his eyebrows and a smile Clive sprang up and came towards him.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Holbrook. When did you come on board? I didn't see you at Southampton. You weren't by any chance the crazy man who arrived by aeroplane at Cherbourg?"

"I was that lunatic," said Bill.

"I was watching you disembark and wondering whether you would be drowned. Well, what is the news from London? It seems ten years since we left. Have you heard anything of Laffin?"

"I saw him last night," said Bill grimly, "and in consequence spent the night in a cold, cold prison cell."

Clive's face was grave, and when Bill had finished his short narrative:

"I find it difficult to believe that Laffin is such a blackguard," he said. "In many ways I'm glad to be out of it all—it doesn't bear thinking about. It seems that the only person left with any faith in the doctor is Benson."

"Benson? Oh, you mean your butler?"

"He is my valet here," said Lowbridge with a smile. "Yes, I brought him; he was unexpectedly loth to leave me—in fact, offered to pay his own fare. In many ways I am glad, because I am not the best of sailors."

"Benson believes in him?"

"Benson is a man filled with admirable sentiments," he said. "It is his faith that no man is as black as he is painted. My own view is that Benson never defended a man less worthy than the doctor."

He glanced curiously at Bill's costume. As usual, the reporter was somewhat oddly arrayed, and, conscious of his scrutiny, Bill laughed.

"You've got to get used to this kit, Lord Lowbridge," he said, "because I've brought no clothes, and unless I can dig something up from the barber, I will be a disgrace to your party—if I were a member of your party," he added hastily.

Clive was amused.

"I'm afraid I cannot help you in the matter of clothes: you and I are not sized alike," he said, and Bill looked enviously at the fine figure of Lord Lowbridge, and felt that twinge of jealousy he had experienced before.

Bullott, most surprisingly, came to his rescue in the matter of clothes. He had brought a dress suit, which he did not intend wearing, so he said, and Bill found that the suit fitted him perfectly. Moreover, Bullott had a larger supply of linen than one man could use.

"I shall be just eating around," said Bullott, when Bill protested against robbing him of his clothes. "And anyway, regular meals interfere with my digestion."

Whilst he was dressing, a steward brought a message from Mr. Stone, asking Holbrook if he would join their party at dinner, and he was all the more grateful that he was presentable when he came down the stairs into the wonderful white hall, that looked like anything but the dining-saloon of a ship, and was greeted by the smiling eyes of the most beautiful girl in the world. Bill had never seen her before in an evening gown, and at sight of her loveliness caught his breath.

"How wonderful that you have come after all, Mr. Holbrook!" she said. "And please, you're not going to talk of Dr. Laffin or of any of the horrors from which we've escaped! I want to talk about this dream ship."

She chatted throughout dinner about the people who were on board. There was a returning ambassador, three great literary geniuses, a star from Hollywood who scintillated so brightly that she could not come into dinner until nine o'clock at night, when her sparkling splendours might be the better observed.

"And there are twenty-five millionaires," she said impressively. "Mr. Stone counted them on the passenger list. Think of it, Mr. Holbrook—twenty-five! Doesn't it make your mouth water?"

"I've yet to meet the millionaire that ever impressed me," said Bill. "They're homely folk, and I guess they hate being what they are."

He looked round the great saloon; from every table there came the shimmer and glint of jewels, for the sea was calm and all chairs in the restaurant were occupied. Even the chronic neurasthenics, who feel ill at the sight of a ship, had plucked up courage to appear on the first night at sea.

To the girl it was a scene of enchantment, outside and beyond anything in her experience; and even Bill was so impressed that he began to regret that, in taking away Bullott's clothes, he had also deprived him of this vision of loveliness. He might have been in a great Parisian restaurant; there was no motion, not so much as a tremor, save that his practised ear heard, above the talk and the soft strains of the orchestra that were playing in a gallery at the far end of the saloon, the distant whirr of the turbines that were driving them through the smooth blue sea.

When dinner was over he fell in naturally at Betty's side, and went up with her in the little elevator to the top deck. As they walked out into the cool night air, a point of white light splashed for a moment on the horizon and was gone.

"That is St. Catherine's," said Bill, "about the only light you'll pick up from now until Fire Island."

She was looking at him with a woman's critical eye.

"You are better dressed than I've ever seen you."

"And for an excellent reason," replied Bill cheerfully. "I am wearing another man's suit! I came on board with nothing but what I stood upright in. But have no fear," he warned her solemnly, raising his hand, "the barber has been true to type and has found me some shirts and other garments which I will not particularise. I shall not disgrace you—that is, if Bullott is content to go what he calls 'eating around.' "

"I haven't seen him since I came on board," said the girl, with sudden seriousness. "Why is he going to America?"

"Why shouldn't he?" parried Bill. "The man that hasn't seen America isn't alive."

"But why is he coming on this particular ship? I thought he was so busy with"—she hesitated—"with this horrible murder. Was that story you told at dinner true?" she asked suddenly. "I mean the story about your fighting with a man in the Park and being arrested?"

"Perfectly true."

"Who was the man?"

"An acquaintance of mine." Bill tried to pass the matter over.

"But it must have been somebody very hateful to you," she insisted. "I can't imagine you fighting for the sake of fighting. Was it the doctor?"

He nodded.

"Thank God!"

"Why do you say that?" he asked in surprise.

"Because, if he is in London, he isn't here!"

"Ever since I've been on this ship," she said at last, "I've had a fearful sense of being—what is the word?—shadowed! I don't know why, but all the time I am looking round, expecting to find him at my elbow."

"Here, on this ship?"

She nodded.

"You don't know Laffin as I know him," she said. "You'll never plumb the deeps of his malignity, of his daring. I still believe he is on this ship."

"Well, I can reassure you on that point," he said. "Bullott watched every passenger come on board, and the doctor was not one."

She shook her head doubtingly.

"You do not know the doctor," she said, and at that moment Clive Lowbridge joined them and the conversation became general.

As soon as he could bring himself to leave her, Bill went down in search of Bullott, and found him in his cabin, studying the passenger list.

"Well?" he asked, as Bill came in.

"Miss Carew thinks that the doctor is on board?"

Bullott put down the list, took off his glasses and replaced them carefully in his waistcoat pocket.

"Maybe she's right," he said calmly.

"Here, on this ship? He wouldn't be such a fool!"

"I don't know." Bullott's attitude exactly reflected that of the girl. "It looks foolish, doesn't it? On the other hand, you may be safer on this ship than in London. I am really advancing what will seem to you to be a wild theory. For a man who has been dealing in theories for weeks, and who has exchanged the safe haven of the Record Department for the kind of existence that I'm dragging out now, theories are almost as tangible as facts."

He ran his fingers through his scanty hair and sighed.

"It was a bad day for me when I took up real police work, Holbrook," he said sadly, "I'm a failure—at least I'm a failure if——"

"If what?" asked Bill, when he paused.

"If I don't find old man Laffin on board this ship."

Bill sat down on the settee and stared at his companion.

"Do you seriously mean that Laffin is here?"

"He may not be here now—but he will get here. How? I'm not even guessing. I've got less idea how he'll get off."

"I hope he comes," said Bill grimly. "I paid seven and sixpence for punching a policeman's jaw: I guess I can stand a few extra thousand dollars for strangling Mr. Blooming Laffin."

Mr. Stone's party were in the café when he found them, and in that sparkling atmosphere all thought of the doctor and his devilry was dissipated. Looking up at the clock when the girl rose, Bill saw, to his surprise, that it was eleven.

Before he went to bed he took a stroll up and down the deck with Bullott, and in the main the conversation was confined to America and its institutions. As eight bells was striking, he went down the broad companion-way to his cabin, turned on the light and began to undress, trying hard to believe that twenty-four hours ago he had shared a small cell with a drunken cabman.

Getting into bed, he took up a book and read for a quarter of an hour, without recognising a single word on the printed page, for his thoughts were in a queer confusion, made up of Laffin and Betty Carew, of police cells and dark priories and cowled monks.

He turned out the light and lay for a long time in the darkness, and must have gone to sleep on his back, for he woke gasping, and sat up suddenly in his berth. There was a squeak which was distinguishable from the creak of the ship—the squeak of a door handle turning.

Before he had retired for the night he had placed a small electric torch within reach of his hand. He stretched out and gripped it, and, as the squeak was repeated, flashed a light on the door.

It was open, and the light focussed upon a yellow, malignant face—the face of Dr. Joshua Laffin!

"SIR JOHN AND LADY WILFORD"

In a second Bill was out of bed. The little alleyway was empty, and when he reached the longer corridor there was nobody in sight. He came back to his room, turned

on the light and took observations. Immediately facing his own door was another. Should he knock?

At that moment he heard somebody in the corridor, and ran out, to find the night steward.

"Who lives in that cabin?" he asked.

"Sir John and Lady Wilford," said the steward, and Bill experienced a heartfelt sense of thankfulness that he had not disturbed that aristocratic couple.

"Did you see any man running along the corridor as you came down?"

"No, sir," replied the steward, and then: "Has anybody tried to get into your cabin?"

"Somebody opened the door."

The steward walked down and examined the catch.

"Maybe you didn't close it, sir." There was something in his tone that suggested that he thought Bill had been dreaming.

He got into his old suit and went in search of Bullott. Bullott's cabin was empty; the bed had not been slept in. A water-bottle and a glass of water stood on the table by his bed; his overcoat was hanging on a hook, as was also his hat. Bill made his way on to the promenade deck, where barefooted deck hands were washing down.

The quartermaster in charge answered in the negative.

"No, sir, I haven't seen Mr. Bullott. Not that I should know him if I saw him, but the fact is, I haven't seen any passenger. Maybe he's up on the boat deck?"

The skies were growing grey, and the morning air was cold and keen, when Bill Holbrook mounted the ladder to the upper deck. There was no sign of Bullott. Not hesitating, Bill invaded that holy of holies, the bridge, and was promptly, if courteously, ordered down by the officer of the watch.

"I've not seen any passengers," said that official. "He is probably around somewhere; passengers get in queer places. Won't you look for him again, and then come and, if necessary, I'll report it to the captain."

Bill returned to Bullott's cabin, but he had not come back. He woke Stone and told him the news.

"Bullott disappeared? Impossible! He'll turn up."

But though the captain was aroused, and the ship searched from stem to stern, there was no sign or news of the missing inspector. Bill went down to breakfast with a heavy heart, and the girl, who had heard from her uncle what had occurred in the night, seemed as much concerned. He had begged Lambert Stone to say nothing of the doctor's presence on the ship, and apparently Mr. Stone had been discreet in this respect, for she did not associate Laffin with the disappearance.

"What can have happened?" she said. "Could he have fallen overboard?"

"Quite impossible, according to the captain," said Bill. "I don't know what to think."

"He will be found," she suggested encouragingly.

"Perhaps he is making inquiries in the steerage?"

Bill shook his head.

"He has not been seen in the steerage, which was the first place the captain sent the third officer to search."

After breakfast he had news which was disturbing and ominous. It came from the ship's doctor, who met him at the head of the gangway.

"I wish you'd come along with me, Mr. Holbrook," said the medical officer. "You're a friend of Mr. Bullott's, aren't you?"

"Yes, a very great friend," said Bill quickly. "Have you found him?"

"No, we haven't found him, only—come along here."

He opened the door of Bullott's cabin, and at first Bill saw nothing unusual, until the doctor pointed. On the floor under his feet was the shape of a cat, stiffly extended in death.

"This cat belongs to the steward—or rather, it belongs to the stewards' mess," said the doctor. "It sometimes followed its favourite master, and apparently followed Gibbon, who is Mr. Bullott's bedroom steward, when he came up to tidy the cabin. The cat got on to the bed and drank from that water." He pointed to the glass of water that was on the bedside table, which seemed as full as it

had been when Bill had seen it the night before. In the daylight, however, he noticed a bluish tinge to the liquid. "This unfortunate animal took two sips, and that is the result."

"Poisoned?" asked Bill.

The doctor nodded.

"I don't know what poison it is, but it is a pretty virulent one," he said. "I have smelt it for cyanide, but it is something much more powerful."

At that moment his own steward brought a bottle, and into this he carefully poured the contents of the glass.

"I can make a rough analysis, but I doubt whether I shall be able to detect the agent used until we get to New York," he said. "Mr. Bullott had no suicidal tendencies?"

"None whatever," said Bill emphatically; "he was the healthiest and sanest man I have met. If there is poison in that glass, and undoubtedly there is, then it was introduced by somebody who wished to do him a mischief. Why was the water put there, anyway?"

The steward volunteered the information that Bullott had asked him to pour out a glass of water before he left for the night, and to place an apple in readiness on a plate, as he was an early riser. The apple was gone.

"He may have eaten that last night," said Bill, "but if he did, he took it out of the cabin."

Holbrook opened the inspector's trunk and made a brief examination, without discovering any clue to the man's disappearance.

"The thing is so peculiar that I think it ought to be reported by wireless to the police of New York and London."

Bill had had a consultation with Lambert Stone, and together they went to the captain and told him of the presence of Dr. Laffin.

"He is not on the ship's list at all," said the captain incredulously, and then: "Are you sure you were not dreaming, Mr. Holbrook?"

"I'm quite sure about that," said Bill.

"This other business about Bullott is rather worrying.

He is a Scotland Yard officer—I knew all about him before he came on board—and he is the last man I should have thought it would have been necessary to protect. My officers, who have searched the ship, say that there is no sign of him, and I am afraid we must return him as having fallen overboard."

"Or having been thrown overboard," said Lambert Stone emphatically. "The doctor has told you about the water in the cabin, and the poisoned cat?"

"Yes, I don't like it at all. I'll be glad when we're past Sandy Hook."

Suddenly, as if he had remembered something, he went into the chart house and presently called them in.

"There was one curious event happened in the night. I see the chief officer's logged it. A steam ketch obstructed the fairway—you probably heard our siren go in the night. We just missed her by a matter of feet, but she swung in and kept abreast of us, in fact, so confoundedly close that the chief officer had to yell to the skipper to haul off, or he'd report him."

"Is it possible that a man could have got from the deck of the *Escorial* to the deck of the ketch without mishap?"

"Quite possible," said the captain; "that is a fact that we noted. She went under our stern eventually, but kept up so well with the ship that it would have been possible for an agile man to transfer from one boat to the other."

Bullott was unknown to the passengers, and his disappearance occasioned no remark. There was, of course, a possibility that he, for some extraordinary reason, had, in his secret way, arranged to be trans-shipped in the English Channel, but if that were so, there was no reason why he should not have notified the captain of the *Escorial* that that was his intention. In this possibility, however, was a grain of comfort.

"I am going to think that he did get off," said the girl resolutely, when she was told. "I refuse to be worried on this trip. Everything is so gorgeous that it is wicked to be unhappy."

For Bill's part, he was glad that Betty Carew (he still thought of her as Carew) took this course. But in his own mind he had doubts as to whether the ketch supplied a solution to the mystery.

"She must have been a fast traveller to keep up with the *Escorial,*" suggested Lowbridge when he heard this theory propounded.

"Not necessarily," was Bill's reply. "The ship had previously struck a bank of fog and was running at half-speed."

The girl's philosophical attitude was one to be imitated; this Bill realised before the Sunday was through. He tried to put Bullott's disappearance from his mind, tried to forget even the sinister possibility of Dr. Laffin's being on board, though he knew in his heart that with the coming of night there was a danger of this man's reappearance.

Betty Stone and her uncle occupied suite H. on D. deck, and his first move that day was to locate this exactly. In the course of the day he had reason to go to the purser's office, and was again reminded of the absence of Bullott when he saw the burly figure of a sailor sitting with his back to the door of the safe, a large Navy revolver strapped to his side.

"Your friend has not turned up, Mr. Holbrook?"

"No, I don't think we shall see him again this trip," said Bill.

The purser made a little face.

"We don't like these disappearances at sea; they have to be reported, and some ships get a bad name in consequence. I know one of the Transatlantic boats that has got so bad a reputation for suicides that they can never get their full complement of passengers, except in the tourist season."

Bill saw that the suite on D. deck would be a fairly easy place to guard. It was the cabin nearest to the broad landing of the companionway, and there were two entrances, which could be observed by anybody who sat on one of the settees in which the landing abounded. The

suite comprised three single cabins, a sitting-room and a bathroom. Lowbridge was housed on the same deck, but two "blocks" away.

Without saying a word to anybody, he decided upon his course of action. That afternoon, when tea was served on the decks, he was missing, and Lowbridge, who went down to call him, returned with the report that he was fast asleep. It is not a difficult matter to slumber in the afternoon on a ship; the real task is to keep awake; and though, when Bill was roused at seven o'clock for dinner, he was feeling livery and irritable, he knew that sleeping was an act of wisdom in a man who expected to be awake all night.

Betty rallied him when he came down to dinner, but Stone, with an uncanny instinct, guessed why he had spent that beautiful afternoon in his cabin.

"Thinking of sitting up all night, Holbrook?" he asked, when they were smoking a cigar together on the deck after dinner.

"Yes, I am," said Bill.

"Do you think there's any danger to the girl?"

"I'm pretty certain there is danger to somebody," said Bill, "and I've a particular desire that it should not be to her."

"I've told her to lock both her cabin doors, and I don't suppose she'll be disturbed, but if there is any trouble you'll call me? I shouldn't like to be far away if Laffin started anything."

Before taking up his vigil that night, Bill went out of his cabin, had a cold bath and came back to his cabin to dress. He found his steward putting his bed ready for the night.

"We've had a wireless from New York, sir—I don't know whether it will affect you. I was in the chief steward's office when it came, and you'll be the first to get one of these—the other passengers get theirs in the morning."

He put a slip of typewritten paper in Bill's hand.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a notification to all passengers."

Bill read the paper. It was headed:

"Extension of Sullivan Act

"The following cablegram has been received from the District Attorney of New York City. The Sullivan Act, prohibiting the carrying of concealed arms, has been amended as follows: No member of a crew or passenger of any ship shall enter New York Harbour having in his possession firearms of any description whatsoever. Passengers in possession of arms of any description must hand them to the purser or to some other officer nominated by the captain of the ship immediately. The question of issuing licences for these arms will be considered on the arrival of the ship at New York."

Beneath was a note from the purser:

"It is important that all ladies and gentlemen in possession of firearms should hand them into my office by midday on Monday. Failure to carry out these instructions will be visited with the severest penalty, and the purser earnestly advises every passenger to comply with the wishes of the District Atney."

"What is the Sullivan Act?"

The Sullivan Act Bill knew; the amendment was not a remarkable phenomenon.

"It doesn't affect me," he said, "for I'm not carrying anything more deadly than a Marmoosa cigar."

He finished dressing and went to his post of observation. The late stewards eyed him curiously; one reported his presence to the purser, and that gentleman came up with the tactful suggestion that he should go to bed.

"I'm sitting here for the remainder of the night. If there's any law against it, or if I'm breaking any ship's

regulations, why, you can bring me before the captain in the morning," said Bill. "Otherwise, this is my idea of comfort, with the cool sea breezes blowing through the portholes—I've paid for ozone and I'm getting it!"

"Don't you get it by day, Mr. Holbrook?" said the purser good-humouredly.

"There are too many people using it in the daytime," said Bill, and the purser wisely left him alone.

The night wore on, and there was no sign of the doctor. Though he had slept through the afternoon, his head began to nod towards dawn, and it required something of an effort to keep himself awake, until the arrival of the early stewards relieved him of any need for watching.

Before turning in he walked the empty deck, and, having swallowed a hot cup of coffee, which, he admitted, was a mean preparation for slumber, he went down into his cabin, intending to sleep. That intention, however, was never carried into effect, for on his pillow he found a letter. It was addressed in pencil and he knew it instantly to be in Bullott's handwriting. With a hand that shook he tore it open, took out a plain sheet of paper, and read:

> "Don't worry about me. I *have* got a good constitution."

There was no signature, but it was Bullott's writing.

THE BLUE BOTTLE

WHAT did he mean? The mystery of his disappearance was more intensified than ever.

His first act was to carry the note to the captain's cabin. That officer was awake and was standing at the door of his handsome quarters in pyjamas and slippers, a big pipe clenched between his teeth. He took the letter from Bill's hand and read it.

"I'm very much relieved," he said, "but I wish your

Scotland Yard men would choose some other place for their disappearing tricks than my ship!"

"Not *my* Scotland Yard men," corrected Bill.

When he took the news to Betty, which he did as soon as she was up on deck, she was undisguisedly delighted.

"I only now realise how much I've worried about poor Mr. Bullott," she said. "But where is he, Billy?"

Now, if there was one word in the language which Bill Holbrook hated worse than any other, it was Billy. To him it meant goats and tin cans and French railway tickets, but now there flashed upon him the realisation that that despised word was one of the sweetest in the English language, and, but for the girl's obvious embarrassment, he would have mentioned his conversion.

Looking past her, he saw Clive Lowbridge reclining in a deck chair, his hands clasped together under his chin, his grave eyes fixed upon them, and his conscience smote him—but not very hard.

Later, Bill thought it was typical of the young man that he should come so straight to a question which others might have gone about with greater circumspection. It happened after lunch (how definitely are shipboard days divided by the meal hours!) and he was in the library, changing a book for Betty, when Clive lounged lazily across to him, dropped his hand on his shoulder.

"Come and have a drink," he said, "a soft drink," he added unnecessarily, and when they were seated and the steward had taken the order: "Holbrook, you are very keen on Miss Stone, aren't you?"

Bill flushed. Even then he did not know whether it was not sacrilege to admit his affection.

"I like her very much," he said awkwardly. "I don't know whether——"

"You're keen on her, and she's keen on you. I hope so, at any rate. I'll tell you something—" he bit off the end of a cigar and lit it before he continued—"you are going to get a prize which I should consider the highest any man could take from the hands of fortune."

"*I'm* going to get a prize! Why, Lord Lowbridge, I think you're going rather fast, aren't you? There is no question about Miss Carew—Stone—being fond of me. She likes me, I hope, but that is all."

The grave eyes were surveying him steadily.

"It is a hateful thing to say, but I hope you're right. She's wonderful—you don't know how wonderful! I've known her so many years longer than you. I knew her when she was a little girl, so high! And if things are as I —am afraid, then indeed you are a lucky man."

Bill looked round guiltily, as though expecting to find the girl at his elbow, ready to deny with every manifestation of anger that she could have so far forgotten what was due to her beauty, her grace and all the holy femininity of her (femininity being particularly holy to Bill at that moment) that she had any thought of him except as she perhaps might think of the steward or some other insignificant person.

"I guess I can't even listen to a provisional congratulation," he said, laughing. "Has this discovery about Laffin made any difference to your position, Lord Lowbridge? I mean, the transference of properties which he effected by his forgeries?"

Lowbridge shook his head.

"I knew I hadn't got them," he said tersely. "That they were stolen from me by friend Laffin doesn't make the case any worse than if they had been gambled from me by my poor uncle. Even now I cannot believe that he was poisoned. Bullott must have made a colossal blunder."

"I hardly think so," said Bill quietly; "Bullott isn't that kind."

Clive Lowbridge shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know what kind he is," he said shortly. "I confess I'm not very much impressed by this theatrical disappearance of his."

For the life of him Bill could not defend his friend, for Bullott's action had struck him in very much the same way as Clive Lowbridge was now describing.

"Have you handed in your gun?" asked Lowbridge with a smile. "I have an antiquated revolver, which is now in the purser's care. It is surprising the number of pistols that were on board; almost everybody seems to have come on the ship prepared to repel invaders!"

Bill explained that he had not been troubled by the order. The purser had shown him his new armoury in glee that morning. Row after row of automatics, revolvers and strange German pistols which had come to him. Each had a label with the owner's name and contemplated address in the United States.

He slept that Monday afternoon, and awoke to find that the weather had changed. Heavy rain was falling, and a moderate sea was running, without greatly affecting the comfort of the *Escorial's* passengers.

He went down to dinner with a lighter heart than he had gone on the previous night. If, somewhere on the ship, was Dr. Laffin, somewhere else was the mysterious Bullott, watching and waiting.

When he went below that night to change, his steward waylaid him.

"I'm not much of a detective myself," said the man, a little self-consciously, "but I'm what you might describe as an observer, sir; and I want to ask you whether you took out the stopper of your water-bottle before you went down to dinner?"

The water-bottles in the cabins were held in a bracket and protected from dust by a small wooden stopper attached to a chain which was fastened to the washstand.

"No, I'm sure I didn't," said Bill.

"And *I'm* sure you didn't," said the steward. "Before I left your cabin to-night and put everything tidy, I distinctly remember putting in the stopper. When I came back late to-night, the stopper was out."

"I haven't been to the cabin between dinner and now," Bill assured him, and went back with him to view the mysterious carafe.

Undoubtedly the cork was out. Bill lifted the bottle to the light. He had a quality, which is well known to ocu-

lists, the gift of colour distinction. To most people, white and something which is nearly white are indistinguishable. To Bill the difference was very distinct. As he held the bottle to the light, he saw that it was no longer colourless. There was the faintest blue tint to it—so faint that the steward failed to see it, and practically suggested that Bill was imagining things.

"Take that to the doctor as it is. I don't suppose you've got a rat on board, but if there is anything living that you can try this dope on, do so."

It was the colour he had seen in the glass of water from which the cat had drunk.

AN ATTACK IN THE NIGHT

THE doctor was in his surgery when the bottle was brought in, and Bill told him of his suspicions.

"We needn't experiment on anything living," said the officer, as he poured a little of the water into a test tube. "I pretty well know the contents of the glass in Bullott's cabin."

He named a drug which was unknown to Holbrook.

"And I hope it will remain unknown to the world," said the doctor. "It is aconitine, one of the swiftest and deadliest poisons known. The tiniest dose, the fraction of a grain, causes death in a few hours. In fact, it is so powerful and deadly a drug that no safe dose is given in the British Pharmacopœia, while the nearest step that has been taken to mark its value as a poisoning agent is to name the dose that can be given with safety as the two-hundredth part of a grain."

He lifted up the bottle.

"Yes, that's sugar," he pointed to a filmy substance at the bottom. "Aconitine can only be given when it is triturated with some gritty powder."

Bill waited while he made the rough test.

"Aconitine," said the doctor briefly, as he put the bubbling test tube into a stand. "Now, who on earth is distributing that poison?"

"Is it difficult to come by?"

"It would be humanly impossible for you to get as much as a grain from any chemist. In fact, few chemists stock it—in proof of which I have none on board this ship, though this is the best-equipped ocean-going surgery I've ever seen."

The steward had been dismissed after the doctor had taken the test in hand, and was waiting hopefully in the alleyway for news of the experiment and for that praise which he had every reason to think was his due. Bill compromised by slipping him a couple of bills as he passed, refusing to satisfy his curiosity.

"I'll take it kindly if you'll keep an eye on my cabin and see who goes in and comes out," he said. "There'll be fifty dollars for you at the end of the voyage, and another hundred if you catch the man who doped the water."

He had only slept very fitfully that afternoon, and realised, after he had taken up his post on the landing that it would require all his resolution to remain awake until the early hours of the morning. In his watch of the night before he had learned a few things which he did not know; he had made friends with one of the stewards who were on duty all night, with the consequence that he was served at intervals with strong, almost nauseatingly strong coffee, and this kept him alert until he heard four bells strike and corrected his watch.

Whether the bells had some somniferous effect, or whether the mere movement to examine his watch had set in motion those toxins which produce slumber, no sooner had the last vibration of the bell droned beyond his limit of hearing, than he found himself nodding. Twice he woke with a start, under the impression that somebody was coming down the stairs from the upper deck. He looked up and could have sworn he saw a head suddenly withdrawn from the rail of the upper landing. Should he go up and see for himself? If he did, he would be deserting his post.

The port side doorway was open. D. deck corre-

sponded with a lower promenade deck, and he would have loved to have gone out and freshened himself with the cold winds of the morning. But he had set himself a task from which he could not deviate, and stolidly he sat, his eyes glued to the door of Betty Carew's state-room.

He heard a slight movement above and, looking up quickly, this time saw a face. A wild-looking brute of a man, with unkempt hair; a face which had not touched razor for weeks was glaring down at him, the hands clasping the polished rails were big and grimy. Even from where he stood, Bill could see the broken nails.

For a second they looked eye to eye, and then the man's head vanished. Bill was on his feet and one foot on the stair when he was recalled to his self-imposed duty by the sound of a tapping noise. It seemed to come from Betty's cabin. He crept along and listened; the noise was not repeated for a while, and then:

Tap, tap!

It was farther along, near to Stone's door.

He tried the handle; it was locked. Then he rapped on the panel; there was no answer.

"Are you all right, Mr. Stone?" he called.

He heard the sound of a crash inside the cabin, and a voice crying:

"Help!"

Bracing himself against the bulwarks, he put up his foot and kicked at the lock, but the door had been obviously bolted on the inside. And now hands were clawing at the panel. He heard the slow movement of a bolt being drawn, and as he pushed open the door, Stone fell into his arms. His face was covered with blood, his silk pyjama jacket was clawed into rags.

"For God's sake what has happened?" asked Bill.

"I don't know," said the other dully. "See if Betty is all right."

Bill turned on the lights and ran into the private saloon. On the the opposite side was the door which opened into Betty's room, and this was unlocked. He flung open the door and she sat up in bed in alarm.

"What's the matter?" she asked, her hand at her throat. "Oh, is it you, Billy? What is wrong?"

"Will you come in to Mr. Stone?"

She stopped only to pull on a dressing-gown and was with him almost as soon as he had reached the wounded man. Stone was lying on his bed, recovering his breath.

"I don't know what happened," he said. "No, I'm not hurt very badly. I wakened with somebody's hands at my throat. They were jerking me down into the pillow, and I think I should have died if someone hadn't interrupted—I suppose it was you?"

"Who attacked you?"

"I don't know. There seemed to be two of them, but perhaps it was only one. I can't tell you; the cabin was in darkness."

"That is the way they came," Bill pointed to the porthole, larger than was to be found in most cabins. It was wide open and swinging.

He searched the floor, and presently uttered an exclamation. Underneath the bed was a short sheath-knife, the handle well worn, the edge stained red with newly shed blood.

There was a roughly-scrawled monogram on the handle, evidently cut by an amateur who had wearied of his work before it was completed. Bill carried the knife to the light and examined the markings.

"There is an 'H' here, and half of another 'H.' Who is H.H.?"

"Nobody I know," said Stone, shaking his head. "I thought you were being a little romantic when you decided to sit up all night, Holbrook. In future you'll sleep in the spare cabin; I'll have a bed made for you."

"What do you mean?" asked Betty, wide-eyed. " 'Romantic to sit up'? Have you been sitting up at night, Mr. Holbrook?"

"I've been just loafing around," he said.

"He's been sitting up on the landing outside, because he thought there was some danger to you from Laffin. There is no sense in pretending that he isn't on board."

"Dr. Laffin here! Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "I knew it, I knew it!"

"Holbrook saw him the first night out, and he's been keeping observation on the cabin ever since."

"That is why you slept in the afternoon, of course?" She dropped her cool hand on Bill's. "You're a dear!"

Had Bill suddenly found himself invested with the Congressional Medal and the Victoria Cross, he could not have experienced a more poignant emotion.

"You are a dear," she nodded, "and I never dreamt —does Clive know?"

"No, I didn't tell Clive," said Stone. "It was at Holbrook's suggestion. He thought that Clive would wish to share his watch."

"And I wanted all the kudos myself," said Bill. "I'm strong for kudos. It is the only word of Greek I know."

The steward, who had come at last to the repeated ringing of the bell, went in search of the doctor, and by the time the medico came, Betty was dressed.

"I'm going on the deck. Will you come with me?"

Bill was almost used to the aspect of the dawn, but to Betty the first loveliness of daybreak came with a magic spell.

"The deck chairs are not put out," he warned her, when she was looking around for somewhere to sit.

He found a deck chair, opened it and spread his overcoat upon it, but she stopped him.

"I want to know something," she said, "and you've got to tell me the truth, Billy—you don't mind my calling you Billy? I feel I know you ever so well, and I can't understand why I didn't call you Billy from the first."

"You didn't want to call me Billy at first," said Holbrook grimly. "I don't know what variety of language a lady uses when she tries to describe somebody very objectionable, but I guess you wished to call me that!"

"I'm calling you Billy now. Where is the doctor?"

"I haven't the least idea. I'm certain that he is somewhere around."

"Does the captain know that he's on the ship?"

"The captain has been told, yes."

"The ship has been searched?"

"Yes—from keel to—whatever they search it to, I can't think of the word," said Bill. "Nauticalisms were never my specialty."

She bit her lip thoughtfully and sat for a long time.

"I knew the doctor would be here. He is going to America, of course?"

"I think so."

"I told Clive he would come, but Clive wouldn't believe it. But perhaps he knew?"

"He knew, but I don't think he wanted to tell you. You were the victim of a very small and very innocent conspiracy of silence."

"I knew. He could not be on the same ship or in the same house and I wouldn't know."

It was only by the clasp of her hands one in the other that he realised the intensity of her horror and hatred of the man she called husband.

"I have lived all my life under his shadow," she said. "He has been an oppression to every joy, a cloud to every ray of sunlight that has made my path a little more pleasant. To escape him I have toured almost every town in England, playing in the worst kind of musical comedies, enduring you'll never guess how many insults, living in lodgings that I don't want to think about. They were hateful, but I preferred them to the house in Camden Road. Why is he on the ship?"

"You have already suggested that he's going to America."

She shook her head.

"It isn't that. Whatever happens, will happen on board the *Escorial*. The climax is coming here"—she pointed to the deck. "When do we reach New York?"

"On Friday?"

"Three more days," she said in despair, "almost four! Mr. Billy Holbrook"—she laid her hand on his—"it was wonderful of you to guard me. Will you go on doing it?"

He nodded, finding a difficulty in speaking.

"Your uncle suggested I should use the spare room in your suite," he said, when he had recovered his voice.

"I don't want you to do that; I don't want anybody to sleep; I don't think I shall sleep either. Why have all the passengers been asked to hand their revolvers to the purser?"

"It is a new American law," he said in surprise. "Our people are always jumping in quick with new laws. I suppose there's been an epidemic of hold-ups. . . ."

"Billy," she said quietly, "there is no such law."

"But the purser had a wireless——"

"I don't care what the purser has had, there is no such law compelling passengers to surrender their revolvers. If there was a wireless, it was a fake, and its object is to disarm the men on the ship."

A RADIO FROM NEW YORK

He stared at her open-mouthed, and once she had voiced her suspicions, their feasibility was obvious.

"Come up on to the boat deck." He gripped her arm, and together they ran up the companionway. Halfway along the deck, at a place just behind the fourth funnel, was a little cabin. Billy had already explored this part of the ship very thoroughly, and, opening the door, he ushered her into an interior dazzlingly lit with thermionic valve lamps. The spectacled young man who frowned at this rude intrusion grinned when he recognised Billy.

"I want to get this radio off right away," said Bill, as he sat down and began to scribble. "This is to the District Attorney, New York. 'Have you sent any instructions to purser of *Escorial* ordering that all pistols on board shall be deposited in purser's office under pain of imprisonment and fine? This is very urgent. Have reason to suspect hold-up on *Escorial*. Radio me immediately. William Holbrook, staff reporter, *Dispatch Herald*.'"

He looked at his watch; it was barely three.

"Please God the District Attorney keeps late hours. It is just after midnight in New York," he said.

They went down to the cabin, where the doctor had put on the last bandage and was on the point of departure.

"This is a matter that must be reported to the captain," he said. "I take a very serious view of these attempts, first by poison and now by knife, to murder the members of your party."

"You don't take half as serious a view as I take," said Bill grimly.

The officer of the watch, to whom the circumstances had been reported, came off duty at four and Bill had a long and earnest talk with him.

"It was easy to get into the cabin," he said. "Mr. Stone's suite is parallel with the lower promenade deck. The glass has been cut and the porthole was open that way. You've heard no more of your friend Bullott?"

"No. But he is on the ship somewhere."

"In which case," said the officer, "he must be no bigger than a flea, for we can't do any more in the way of searching this ship unless we have the paint washed!"

"Maybe you'll find him under that," laughed Bill.

He could only marvel, as the days progressed, how perfectly a ship's company keeps a secret. Not one of the thousands that travelled on that great vessel knew how near they had been to tragedy, or guessed the startling events that had occurred whilst they slept.

"It is uncanny," agreed Betty. She was stretched on her deck chair in the hour before lunch. Clad in white from her chin to the tips of her dainty feet, she held one young man entranced. "I can almost believe that I've been dreaming myself. A woman has just told me that she never as a rule travels by this line because they use preservatives in the milk! She has brought her own milk this voyage, and her only worry is whether she has laid down a sufficient supply to last out to New York!"

Bill said nothing. He was wondering whether these complacent passengers, to whom ocean travel was a

scarcely noticeable experience, would have a shock before the stem of the vessel ploughed the Hudson River.

"Another one told me that she never liked travelling in July because it is too late for icebergs. She says that she loves icebergs because they thrill her," said Clive.

A steward came up at that moment, searching the passengers' faces, and, coming to Bill, caught his eye, and hurried towards him.

"A radio for you, sir."

Bill Holbrook carried the message into the shelter of the social hall and read:

> "No such order has been issued by my department. Sullivan Act applies within the frontiers of the United States."

It was signed by the District Attorney. Bill read the message again. What should he do? The first step was to interview the purser. He found that gentleman in his own cabin, very busy with the classification of those very weapons with which the message was concerned.

"Read this," said Bill. "It is a reply to my wire to the District Attorney, asking him whether he had issued any order to the effect that passengers are not allowed to be in possession of pistols during the voyage."

The purser, a stout, clean-shaven man, with the plump face which is peculiar to pursers, read the message and frowned.

"I can't understand that," he said. "There is no doubt we had a radio from the District Attorney."

"It was a fake," said Bill, "and I'm telling you something, Mr. Purser. It was faked by people who have a direct interest in disarming the passengers of this ship."

The purser's jaw dropped, and then he laughed.

"Rubbish!" he said. "You're trying to get a story out of the ship, Holbrook. That won't do at all."

"How do you account for this message?" asked Bill stubbornly.

The purser read it again.

"It certainly is strange," he said thoughtfully, "but naturally I can't act upon a private message. I had better see the captain."

There was on the table, almost at Bill's hand, a long Browning pistol, and tied to the barrel was a small brown carton of shells. Bill looked at it thoughtfully.

"I'll see the captain right away, Holbrook," said the purser. "You just wait here until I return."

Bill strolled out of the cabin. The purser's office was empty. He saw that the position of the officer's bed practically covered one door, the chair in which sat the armed quartermaster effectively protected the other.

"The purser is well guarded," he said to himself.

There was a certain reminiscent ring about the words, and he repeated them. The purser's guard? What guard had he heard about, or talked about, in connection with ships? And then it came to him suddenly. "Second engine-room guard!" Tinker Lane, the betrayer of the Twenty-Third Degree of the Proud Sons of Ragousa, had talked about an engine-room guard! That was a matter which needed thinking out. He got back to the purser's cabin a little in advance of the officer himself.

"I've seen the captain," said the purser. "He is sending another radio to New York, but in any case he thinks it is just as well if we keep these pistol until we reach port—what do passengers want guns for, anyway?" he demanded. "The captain thinks that, so long as we've got arms in the ship's store, there's no reason to worry about your hold-up suggestion."

"Where is the ship's store?"

"Back of the chart-room," said the purser. "We've got enough rifles and revolvers to run a war!"

"I see," said Bill. "You may be sorry, Mr. Purser—darned sorry—before this trip is through, that you didn't take my advice."

And then he strolled out to the deck, and did not tell the girl the contents of the radio message until they were alone.

"They're so very satisfied that all things are for the

best in the best of possible ships that I don't think it is possible we shall shake their faith. The thing is to leave them to it."

She shivered.

"It is quite a horrible idea—I mean that there are no arms on the ship except those in a store which may be rushed at any moment!" she said, and he could only agree.

Going down to lunch, they joined the little group that stood before the bulletin board at the head of the companionway. It was covered with sheets of typewritten news that had been received during the night. There was the usual story of a Pittsburg heiress who was divorcing her husband, the inevitable rail accident in France, a speech by the Chancellor of the Exchequer—the news was English, and would remain English till the morrow, when Cape Cod would colour the bulletins with tales of chorus-girl-millionaire marriages, risings in Mexico and fluctuations in the price of cotton. One message interested Bill and he stayed behind to read it.

"Spanish police report the disappearance from Bilboa, under suspicious circumstances, of oil-tanker *Thomas Inland*. During night, when captain and officers were ashore, vessel put out to sea without authority and has not been sighted since. The Spanish gunboat *Alfonso XIII* is searching for the ship, but the weather in the bay is foggy."

He was going down to ponder this matter, when a man from the purser's department pinned up two supplementary messages, and one of these was headed:

"The Missing Ship"

"No further news has been heard of the oil-tanker. It is believed that some English sailors who have been living at Bilboa are responsible, and that the man who organised the theft was a Captain Harvey Hale, who is being sought for by the English police."

"Harvey Hale"—H.H.! Bill gasped as the full understanding of those initials on the knife came to him. Was Harvey Hale on board the ship? If he were, what connection was there in this adventure of Laffin's, with the stolen tanker at Bilboa? The letter "H" was not an uncommon initial; there might be a dozen people on board who could lay claim to it. But the coincidence was very striking.

Smooth as was the sea, there was just the hint of a swell, and this had been sufficient to send Clive Lowbridge to his cabin.

"Clive thinks that his coffee was tampered with this morning," said Betty. They were alone at the table, for Lambert Stone was too shaken to appear that day.

"I expect we shall all be hypochondriacs, or imitating the Sultan of Turkey, who has his food tasted by an official poison-proof varlet before he eats anything, before we reach New York," said Bill.

She was very serious and a thought pale. He wondered whether she shared Clive Lowbridge's objection to the slight roll of the big vessel. But when he asked her tactfully if she would like to cut out two courses and go on to the deck, she declined.

"You can cut out the course, if you want. But it is more comfortable here. Besides, I want to talk—I always want to talk when I meet you," she added, a little ruefully. "Billy, I'm going to be an heiress after all, and against my will." And then: "Mr. Stone thinks my father is dead."

He was silent.

"You think so, too, don't you?"

"Yes." Honesty compelled him to the answer. "I am afraid that it is true," he said softly.

"Poor father! And yet—he meant so little to me, Billy. He was as much a stranger as you were. Is there an instinct that makes children recognise their own parents?"

"I don't think so," said Bill. "The only instinct to which children respond is that which makes them give

love for love and care for care. That is how I have sized it up. If you give children affection and thought and sympathy, why, they return it to you, whether you're their father or their mother or their uncle or their cousin ninth removed. If you give them justice, they'll give you justice. A child is a mirror."

"You talk almost like the President of an Orphan Home," she said with a faint smile.

"Don't I just? Children have been a study of mine. I don't think you need grieve too much. Remember, your father thought you were dead, and had ceased to mourn you—and anyway, had never known you or given you the chance of loving him."

"I think I'll come up to the deck after all," she said with a sigh.

While she went in to see whether her uncle had had his lunch, he walked along to his own cabin. The steward was nowhere in sight, and his hand was on the knob of the door when, looking up, he saw on the white enamelled surface, the print of a large black hand. He looked at it in amazement. Was that a warning? Turning the handle, he opened the door and stepped in. He took one stride, then stood like a man petrified.

Lying on his bed, his eyes half-shut, his clothes in rags, was a man.

For a second Bill did not recognise the haggard, unshaven face, and then:

"My God!" he said. "Bullott, where did you come from?"

BULLOTT EXPLAINS

"SHUT the door," said Bullott faintly, "and lock it. They got me last night. It was my own fault. He told me to be careful, and, like a fool, I came on to the deck and Laffin recognised me, and one of his men got a knife in before I could pull a gun."

"Laffin? Is it he you are speaking about?"

Bullott smiled faintly.

"I'll tell you later," he said. "Is that door locked?"

Bill assured him it was.

"Who lives opposite to you?"

"Sir John and Lady Wilford," said Bill. "I was asking the purser about them. They came on board at Southampton. Sir John is an invalid and his wife nurses him."

"Ever come down for meals?"

"No," said Bill in surprise. "What do you suggest? Who are they?"

"I'll tell you that later, too," grunted Bullott.

There was no need to ask where the hand print had come from; both his hands were the colour of soot and greasy withal.

"You've been working in the engine-room," accused Bill.

Bullott's face twitched.

"Yes, I've been greasing," he said laconically. "It is not so nice a job as you'd think, but I've got the constitution. Anything happened?"

"Nothing, except that they've taken all our guns away on a fake message from New York. The purser has them."

The man moved uneasily on the bed and winced with the pain of it. Bill would have sent for the doctor, but he refused that help.

"It is only a cut—snicked one of the ribs."

He showed the wound, which was more serious than he had imagined. Bill dressed it as well as he could, and when he had made the man comfortable:

"Now, tell me what in thunder this is all about. To where did you disappear?"

"I disappeared the night Sir John and his lady went overboard and their places were taken by Harvey Hale and Dr. Laffin. I saw the ketch in the fog—we nearly collided with it. It came alongside, and I was one of the few who were looking overboard at that hour, certainly the only man who saw two people slide down a rope and two others take their place, helped by I don't know how many steerage passengers! Quick! You've no idea how

quick they were. They were in my cabin before I could return."

"Incidentally they doped the glass of water that had been put for you there."

Bullott nodded.

"I heard about that," he said. "I went down to the engine-room. I thought I had better clear. And I hoped that my disappearance would lead to a thorough search of the ship and the discovery that Laffin was on board. I suppose you wonder why I didn't tackle him single-handed? Well, I'll tell you. He isn't single-handed, not by eighty! You haven't looked at the steerage, have you? The toughest crowd that has ever sailed out of Southampton. There isn't one of them that would be admitted to the United States."

"Then why on earth—" began Bill.

"Because they're not going to be admitted to the United States," said Bullott with a mirthless smile. "No, I'd already arranged through the Yard where I should go to, and the captain knew all about it."

"Are you sure?" said Bill incredulously.

"Absolutely sure. He's a pretty good actor, that captain. Most of these Yankee seamen have faces that won't tell on 'em! I've been greasing down in the engine-room and it is hell! The only time I saw you near to was when I looked over the rails. I've seen you in the distance a dozen times."

"Does the captain know?"

"The captain knows all that I know," said Bullott, "but he doesn't take the same view that I take. You see, we didn't know enough, before the ship sailed, for Scotland Yard to issue any more than the usual official warning. They knew that an attempt would be made on the strong-room, but then, they know that every voyage, and take the necessary precautions. Where are you going now?"

Bill had remembered that he had promised to join the girl on deck.

"Wait." Bullott raised a warning finger. "You're not

to tell anybody I'm here. The right people will find out soon enough."

With this observation, Bill went back to Betty Carew, and it only needed one glance at his face to tell her that something unusual had happened.

"I don't want to lie to you," he said, "but it is true that there has been an extraordinary development, but I cannot tell you what it is."

"What do you want me to do—anything?" she asked.

"Nothing at all."

The swell was more pronounced now, but Clive Lowbridge had managed to drag himself on to the deck, and fell gracefully into a chair by her side.

"There's nothing romantic about seasickness, is there?" he groaned. "I feel that even Benson despises me."

Benson, who stood rigidly by, with a rug over his arm, showed neither contempt nor approval.

"You're a good sailor, Benson?"

"Yes, Madam, a perfect sailor. I have served at sea."

"As a steward?"

"Yes, Madam. I have travelled many thousands of miles. Is there anything more you require, my lord?"

"Nothing, thank you, Benson."

Benson made as though he were going away, but stopped and looked hesitatingly at the girl.

"Would Mr. Stone consider it an impertinence if I offered to help him a little? I understand that he is ill?"

"He had a bad fall," said the girl, that being the fiction that they had agreed upon. "I'm sure he would be awfully pleased of any help you could give him, Benson."

With a little nod, the tall man disappeared through the companion opening.

"Funny devil, that. I never know quite what to make of him," said Lowbridge languidly. "He's the most perfect servant I've ever had; he gives me no trouble; never asks for his wages at inconvenient moments, though they're low enough, heaven knows, and never so much

as hints at his dissatisfaction with my humble estate. There are times," he mused, "when I think that Benson is too good to be true."

She laughed.

"Well, what does our young journalistic friend think of things? Does he believe we shall be murdered before we reach New York? Billy—is it Billy?" he laughed softly. "Forgive me," as he saw the colour rise in her face. "He's rather a nice boy, that—I speak from the eminence of thirty-one years, which is a very lofty plane indeed. He's a nice boy, and if—if it was hopeless for me, I'd be glad if—there's another if!"

"Don't say any more, Clive." She laid her hand on his arm. "The 'if' is a very big one just at present, isn't it?"

"Which?"

"The Laffin 'if'."

"I don't believe he's on board, and if he is, why, it ought to be an easy matter to arrest him, the brute! How long do we stay in New York?" he asked.

"In New York? I—I have the queerest feeling at this moment that we'll never reach New York."

Clive Lowbridge raised his languid eyebrows.

"For heaven's sake, Betty, don't get such horrible ideas," he said petulantly. "You're an awfully depressing influence these days. It must be your association with our crime expert!"

"I don't know why I said that, and I know less why I felt as I did, but the idea of going to New York at all seemed, in that second, such an impossible one; and yet we are not more than three or four days from that city, are we?"

"Ninety-six hours, to be exact," said Clive. "And there are sixty minutes in every hour. And when you are feeling as I am feeling at this moment, considerably more than sixty seconds in every minute—it's a horrible prospect!"

Billy had gone back to his wounded friend and found him half-dozing. He had locked him in the cabin and carried the key in his pocket. The sound of the turning

lock woke the detective, and when Bill opened the door he saw his hand was underneath his pillow.

"Bullott, I'm going to bring the captain down to see you."

"Don't," said the other laconically; "I've already sent him a note. And I can tell you, the captain is absolutely fed up with me. He regards me as a sensationalist who is trying to work up a scare. People say that the sea makes a man imaginative—rubbish! There is nothing so unimaginative as a seaman—otherwise, he'd never go to sea! He may believe in ghosts, and he may be superstitious about unlucky ships, but he refuses to see more than the barometer can show him. He's a man who deals with hard facts, with the relative position of the sun and the horizon, with the pull of currents and the habits of icebergs, the unintelligence of pilots and the extortions of harbour customs."

"You seem to know a lot about it," laughed Bill.

"I guess I do. I've been classifying criminal minds for years, and I've come across a few seamen—they're all alike. Holbrook," he went on more seriously, "if what I think is going to happen does, then there's going to be hell on board this packet. You've got to get the purser to hand over those guns to the people who own 'em."

Bill shook his head.

"I've tried and failed. And I don't think it really matters. Not a half per cent. of the people who carry a gun can use one. Haven't you read the story of the terrified passengers on the train that was held up—more guns than money, and three men skinned nine cars and got away without a scratch?"

"Perhaps you're right," said the detective. "In the meantime, go along and pinch a gun for yourself."

Bill smiled and touched his laden hip pocket. He had not been in the purser's cabin for nothing.

THE EVENING OF THE BALL

THERE was nothing unusual in the appearance of U.S.S. *Escorial* to suggest the imminence of a tragedy. The bugles called regularly to luxurious meals, the pillared swimming-bath echoed with the laughter of young people and the splash and gurgle of water. The band played in the social hall, where the elderly and the middle-aged preferred to take their tea. The smoke-room was crowded from afternoon till night, and the eight, or more than eight, crooks who worked this particular ship went about their unlawful occupations with skill and modesty.

A fancy dress ball had been announced for that night: the notice was up in the hall, with the further information that dresses, masks, wigs, etc., could be obtained from the amazing barber, who supplied everything from shoe-laces to surreptitious roulette wheels, for the comfort and pleasure of the *Escorial's* guests. As he was shaving Bill he offered his assistance.

"I could make you up so that nobody would know you," he said.

"Thank you—I'm in the publicity business," interrupted Bill.

That night, after dinner, the centre of the social hall was cleared, and carpets rolled up, exposing a well-sprung dancing floor, and when the hall began to fill, and the trap drummer of the band made his presence known, it was difficult for Betty to believe that they were on a ship in the middle of the ocean, more than a thousand miles from the nearest land.

"It's very wonderful!" she breathed. He had found a tapestried sofa for her, coffee had been served, and Mr. Stone, a little pale but otherwise cheerful, had been assisted into a corner seat, his wound hidden beneath a black silk bandage.

"Why do you go so often to your cabin? One would think you had a sick child!" she smiled, when Bill came back for the third time.

There was an opportunity now, for the band was playing noisily and the sound of voices and laughter made it impossible that he could be overheard.

"Bullott is in my cabin," he whispered. "Nobody must know."

When the dance had finished, she rose.

"Take me on to the deck," she commanded, and he led her to the forward part of the promenade, which at this hour was bare of people. "Now tell me," she said. "Bullott is in your cabin? Why doesn't he come up?"

She listened without interruption.

"He thinks something is going to happen?"

"I won't deceive you—he does. So do I."

"It's in the air to-night. I couldn't help feeling, when I saw those dominoes and masks dancing on the floor, how easy it would be—oh no, that would be too absurd. I'm thinking in terms of melodrama."

"Melodrama belongs to the world," said Bill. "There isn't a police station that isn't full of it; there isn't an insane asylum that doesn't have it all, from Act One to the final drop."

"I'd like to see Mr. Bullott," she said suddenly.

Bill was in a dilemma; he was already regretting that he had broken faith with his friend.

"I'll take you down," he said.

To his relief, Bullott was rather amused than otherwise at the sight of the girl.

"I thought he'd tell *you,*" he said, and she flushed at the emphasis he laid on the last word. "Come right in, Miss Stone, and find a place to sit. It isn't my cabin, and where Holbrook is going to sleep to-night I don't know."

"I've come to ask you to tell me something, Mr. Bullott," she said. "Is there really any serious danger?"

"Here, on the *Escorial?* Yes, there is some sort of danger for a few people here."

"For me?"

He looked perplexed.

"I don't know—yes, I guess there is," he said. "You want the truth?"

She nodded her thanks.

"Is there any way by which that danger can be avoided? Can't somebody be told?" There was a hint of impatience as well as anxiety in her voice.

"Why, no," said Bullott, considering the matter. "If we were travelling by railroad, there'd be an alarm signal that we could pull, and the train would stop and a policeman would come along and inquire. But nothing stops an ocean liner except a rock or an iceberg, or maybe, a man overboard; and they don't stop so long for that. We've got to go through with it. I've told the officers and they just looked at me as though I were not quite right in the head. My only hope is that I get a reply to the radio I've sent to Scotland Yard. That's the only kind of reply that is worth while."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Do you know Halifax? There are two British cruisers there, the *Sussex* and the *Kent,* fast commerce destroyers. I've asked for a convoy."

Bill looked at him awe-stricken.

"You never have, Bullott! You've taken a risk."

"I'm taking a worse one," said Bullott. "I thought it out one night, when I was working down in that hot place"—he pointed to the floor. "It seemed the only thing that I could do. I've got the codebook with me that we use on special occasions. Fortunately, there's a code word for Kent and one for Sussex, so I could send it without letting the operator know what I was getting at. It was the last thing I did before I came in here. I was hiding all this morning, down amongst the mailbags—you wouldn't think I could get there, but I did. I had to run the gauntlet to reach this cabin. A whole lot of people didn't think I'd get here, either," he added, with a chuckle, "and not only thought so, but made it pretty hard for me to take that short journey. I've hidden in every kind of place—ventilators, bulkheads, rope stores, and if I'd been seen for the fraction of a second I'd have been a dead man."

"Not this morning in broad daylight?"

"This morning in broad daylight. Where's Benson?" he asked.

"Whom do you mean—not Lord Lowbridge's servant?" said the girl. "He's with my father."

Bullott grunted something.

"It's going to be some job," he said at last. "No, Miss Stone, there's nothing you can do for me, except to keep it secret that I'm back. I'm not squealing because Holbrook told you; I expected he would."

He put his hand under his pillow again and took out a small Browning.

"Ever use a pistol?"

She nodded.

"In dramas," she said.

"Well, I hope you won't use it in this drama. That's loaded. Can you hide it somewhere—in your bag, maybe," he said, looking down at the little bag at her wrist. "That's good! Don't forget that it is loaded, and push down the safety catch with your thumb before you press the trigger. You've nine chances there."

Her face was white.

"Are you armed also?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But don't you think I ought to tell Mr. Stone?"

He considered this, and decided against such a course.

"The fewer people know, the better. It might have been wiser to have told the passengers in the first place, but I did not know in time—you can leave the key on the inside; I think I can lock and unlock it now. My wound is much easier."

They heard the door locked as they turned into the alleyway.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked, as they reached the deck.

"I've been wondering rather what *you* think," said Bill.

"You mean if I'm frightened? I was a little bit, but not now. If I only knew where the danger was coming from, and exactly how it threatens——"

"I feel that way myself," said Bill. "It's the uncertainty of it, the nervous expectation of attack from all sides that rattles me." He drew a long breath.

"Why that sigh?" she asked with a smile.

"I'm wondering about the *Sussex* and the *Kent*. Warships are a hobby of mine," he said.

All that night Bill sat aloof, literally his back to the wall, watching every point, every move, ready keyed up to deal with the blow when it struck.

He had declined Stone's offer to sleep in the suite.

"I shall be much better outside," he said. "It's only a few paces to the lower promenade deck; I can watch both the doors and the windows," he added.

The night steward saw him and grinned his respectful admiration of Bill Holbrook's eccentricity.

"I can't understand why you always sit up all night, sir. You're not afraid of shipwreck, are you?" asked the steward.

That explanation had never occurred to Bill.

"Got it first time, son," he said solemnly. "I have a mad passion for dying well-dressed."

The steward lingered to gossip.

"I've never known a voyage like this; nothing's happened," he said. "Dead and alive voyage, I call it."

"What do you want to happen?" asked Bill.

"Oh, nothing," said the man vaguely; "only. . . . stewards like to see something doing. It doesn't seem natural for a voyage to be—well, just a voyage. You're an American, sir, aren't you?"

"I have that peculiarity," said Bill.

"Doesn't it strike you that things are very quiet on the *Escorial*. Of course, a fancy dress ball wakens them up a bit, but lord! nothing to what I have seen in my time. Why, I've known the smoke-room to be full from the beginning of the voyage to the end! That was in the days before the ships went dry," he said regretfully.

After a while he made a reluctant retirement, and Bill was left alone. From time to time he walked down the promenade deck and glanced left and right. At least he

expected some appearance of Laffin's men, and his nerves were on edge. But all that he could see was the empty sweep of the deck, and all he heard was the scrub—scrub—scrub overhead; the watch was making the decks presentable for the day that soon would dawn.

Was he mistaken, after all? Had Laffin and his villainy so shaken him that he saw the doctor's hand in everything—he remembered the poisoned water, the midnight intruder to Stone's suite. . . . Bullott lying wounded in his cabin. . . . No, something was afoot—some diabolical mischief that he could not fathom.

The second officer came down the stairs from the upper deck. He was wearing his heavy sea boots and had evidently come straight from duty on the bridge.

"Can't sleep?" he said with a pleasant smile. "I'd like to change places with you!"

Above him he heard the voices of the watch. The quartermaster was giving an order, and grumbling in lurid language at the inefficiency of one of his team. And then his heart leapt. He saw the door of Betty's room open slowly . . . he saw her peeping round the edge of the door, and her smile reassured him.

"I've just wakened up. Is it very late?"

"Nearly four," he said.

"I don't think I can sleep any more. Won't you go and lie down?"

He shook his head, and, with a little nod, she closed the door, and he heard the lock snap. At any rate, he could walk on the deck for a few minutes, and he was glad of the respite.

Yes, the watch were at their work, their long scrubbers moving leisurely; he heard the swish and swirl of water as it was thrown across the deck, the bubbling of the hosepipe—pleasant, homely sounds that filled him with a sense of security.

He was wondering whether any reply had come to Bullott's radio, and mounting the companion he walked along the bridge deck and tapped at the door of the wireless hut. The operator on duty opened it for him.

"Hullo! Any more messages?" he asked. "The old man properly turned you down! He sent a radio to New York to ask if you were batty. Haven't had a reply yet."

"Have you got a message for Bullott?"

"What's the good? He's not here, is he? He's the man that fell overboard in the Channel."

"He's here all right," said Bill.

He closed the door behind him and sat down on the operator's table.

"There's no wire for you. There's one from Esyard, whoever that may be, and it is intended for the Captain."

"I think that is the one I'm waiting for," said Bill.

"Can't give it to you, son," said the man briskly. "It belongs to the skipper. I'll give it to him as soon as he wakes. Yards of it!"

"Do the words Kent and Sussex appear in the message?" asked Bill.

"Good Lord, you're a thought reader! Yes, they do! They're code though, aren't they? Otherwise it is a plain English message, I can tell you. Something about '*Kent* and *Sussex* proceeding immediately.' There's lashings of a code wire for the Captain—six pages of it."

"My friend, you'll be wise if you wake the Captain and give him that message," said Bill earnestly. "You don't know what may depend upon it."

The operator grinned.

"I know what would happen if I woke him," he said; "life would lose its savour for three or four voyages. Hullo, who's that?"

Somebody had knocked at the door. He unfastened the catch and threw it open. For a second he did not see anything, and then out of the darkness came a black shape, masked from head to foot; the two eyes glittered through an opening in the cowl, and the barrel of a pistol covered him.

"Don't move, don't touch that instrument, or you're a dead man!" said a gruff voice. "In the name of the Proud Sons of Ragousa, I order you step out and step lively!"

THE CONTROL

THE curious mixture of pomp and argot would in any other circumstances have aroused Bill to merriment; but now, as something cold gripped his heart, he knew that the hour of crisis had arrived, and followed the operator to the dark deck.

There were other cloaked forms there; Bill counted ten; there were probably more.

"Get into that cabin," ordered the spokesman of the Proud Sons, and his companion obeyed. "Take off all messages that come, shoot anybody who attempts to open the door, and, if the worst comes to the worst, destroy the instruments and smash those valves."

"All right," growled the other.

"Where is your cabin?" demanded the chief spokesman.

"Aft. What is the game?" began the radio man.

"Don't ask questions. Take this man to his cabin and lock him in. What are you?" He was speaking to Bill, and Holbrook was happy in the thought that he had not been recognised.

"I'm a passenger," he said.

"Keep him here. Go forrard, you men."

The mask who was evidently in command towered above his fellows, a veritable giant. Bill saw them moving forward towards the bridge, and presently they were lost to view. He heard nothing, till there was a cry and the muffled sound of a shot. One of the men who were guarding him said something in a low voice; what it was Bill could not hear.

He guessed what had happened before two of the robed men came along the deck, supporting a limp figure, that in the growing light Bill recognised as the officer of the watch.

"Put him in that second cabin."

What had happened to the captain? His stateroom was immediately behind the bridge. Bill was to learn.

"When the skipper comes to his senses, handcuff him

and keep him locked in his cabin. Seventy-nine and eighty, go forrard and search his cabin for arms. The armoury is behind; I've got the key of that. Don't interfere with the stewards unless they get fresh—the passengers are to be kept quiet."

A figure came running up the ladder and saluted.

"Control established in the engine-room, sir," he reported.

"Muster the deck hands aft," said the tall commander. "Go back to them, Sam, and say a few short words about what's going to happen if they give us any trouble. You know the line of talk that'll scare that trash."

When they brought the injured officer along, they had pushed Bill back against the rail, and now that their attention was directed to some happening elsewhere, he seized his opportunity. In a second he had slipped over the rail, and went down the stanchion hand over hand, and apparently his departure was not noticed.

The watch had disappeared from the deck; evidently they had been shepherded aft. As he darted into the companionway, he caught sight of the night steward, and whistled to him softly. In a few words he told that startled man what had happened.

"You people are safe," he said; "they may skin the passengers, but the stewards will carry on as usual. I want a steward's suit from you; can you fix me?"

"Does the captain know?"

"I guess he does know," said Bill, without troubling to explain. "This is a fact, and there's no sense in asking questions. Can you get me a suit—if so, get it quick!"

The steward led him down to an unused cabin, in which, as Bill suspected, he slept, contrary to ship's regulations. From a locker he produced a suit of white ducks, and Holbrook changed instanter. His scheme was a simple one. He guessed rightly that the pirates would take little notice of the ship's staff, so long as they carried out instructions. In this capacity he might have an opportunity of protecting the girl.

He was no sooner dressed than he borrowed the stew-

ard's razor and lather-brush, and although he was clean-shaven, he made a marvellous transformation of his face, for he removed the rather heavy eyebrows that were a feature of his face. The change was so marked that the steward at first hardly recognised him.

"I know a crook who used to walk past the man who was looking for him on the strength of shaved eyebrows," said Bill. "It is a little wheeze that I remembered in time. Now go forrard and see the purser, if they haven't already got him. Tell the chief steward—he knows me—what I'm doing, and ask the rest of the men to keep their mouths shut. This means money for them when we reach New York."

"What are they going to do to us, sir?"

The steward was less concerned with the fortune that might await him in New York City than with his personal safety. He was a man with three children, as he explained several times, and had a mother dependent on him.

As soon as Bill got rid of him, he hastened to his own cabin, knocked at the door and Bullott opened to him, and stepped back in amazement at the appearance of this stranger. It took a few seconds for Bill to explain what had happened.

"The ship is manned by the Sons of Ragousa—the Twenty-Third Degree is operating powerfully! I think I can keep myself hidden, but what of you, Bullott?"

"They'll not hurt me," said Bullott. "They were chiefly anxious that their game should not be exposed before they came into action. I doubt if they will hurt anybody."

He looked at Bill strangely.

"Unless it is you," he said quietly.

"But why me?" asked Holbrook, genuinely surprised that he should be singled out of all the others for punishment.

"I have an idea," said the other, and then: "Your only chance is to keep out of sight and watch points. I don't think I should stay here if I were you."

When Bill rejoined his steward friend, he found him talking with an agitated purser, and it said much for the efficacy of his disguise that he was not immediately recognised.

"They have taken charge of my office," said the officer, when Holbrook made himself known. "So far there has been no bloodshed, although I've an idea that something happened on the bridge. I've had orders to keep the passengers in the dark, but to carry on the duties as though nothing had happened. There's going to be a panic amongst them if this gets known."

"Where did the men come from?" asked Bill.

"They were all in the steerage," said the purser. "I had my suspicions when we left Southampton that the crowd we carried forrard were a tough lot. What are you going to do, Mr. Holbrook?"

"I've signed on as a steward for the rest of the trip."

"They will recognise you," he said, "that is, if they know you at all. You might pass muster here in artificial light, but the moment they see you by daylight—go along and see the barber: he may fix you up."

The barber! Bill remembered the urgent importunity of that universal provider on the previous afternoon, and without another word went down to the deck where the barber's shop was situated, and found the worthy man in a condition of excitement, for the news had run like wildfire amongst the stewards that the ship was in the hands of a hold-up gang.

"Yes, yes, but I can't be bothered now, Mr. Holbrook," he said irritably. "My God, what's going to happen to us if they scuttle the ship? And they'll think no more of scuttling the ship——"

Bill pushed him into his spacious cabin and shut the door.

"If they scuttle the ship they'll drown themselves, and they've no intention of doing anything so stupid," he said. "Now listen to me! The only chance we have of beating this crowd is for one of the people on board who knows the gang to be free to move about. Produce your

moustache, man, and make good your boast, that my own maiden aunt would not know me!"

The barber was in no mood to assist the masquerade, but after a little persuasion, and the skinning of yet another note from the reporter's wad, he seated him in his chair, and for a quarter of an hour, with many fearful backward glances lest an apparition in black appeared suddenly in the doorway, worked on his subject. When he had finished, Bill gazed into the mirror, a truly astonished man.

During the period he was in the chair, he had developed a pair of shaggy red eyebrows, and a short-clipped, red moustache; his hair was almost the colour of Betty Carew's, and was parted and curled in a manner repugnant to his finest feelings.

"Gosh!" he said in wonder.

The barber so far forgot his trepidation as to purr complacently.

"You wouldn't get that done better in London, sir," he said. "All you've got to do now is to come and see me every morning, and I'll keep your hair right."

Bill eventually found the purser: he was deep in conversation with a masked figure that stood before his sometime office. Looking round, he saw the waiting steward and waved him away impatiently.

"What do you want?" he snapped, when at last the parley was at an end. "I don't want to be bothered. Get your orders from the chief steward."

"Come along with me to the chief steward, and tell him to do as I ask," said Bill, and the purser's jaw dropped.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

Bill grinned. It was then that he made himself known.

"I want you to tell the chief steward to put me in charge of Suite H, Mr. Stone's cabin. Nobody is to know who I am, not even Mr. Stone or his niece, unless they find out for themselves."

"Wait a minute," said the purser; "I want to think this out! If you go down to the steward's quarters they'll

spot you, and there's bound to be one of them in with this crowd and you'll be betrayed. You'd better use an empty cabin to sleep in at night, and keep as far away from the stewards' quarters as you can. Who is your own steward?"

Bill told him.

"Well, he can come on and help you. What do you think they're going to do with us, Mr. Holbrook?"

"They'll clear the ship of valuables, and of course the fifty million dollars in your safe will be practically in their hands."

"It is in their hands already," interrupted the purser bitterly. "They've got the boxes piled up in my office. But what can they do? They'll be caught."

"Why should they be caught?" asked Bill. "You're arguing on unknown factors. This crime was inevitable. Sooner or later, it was certain that a ship would be held up in mid-ocean—it's the easiest thing in the world, easier than holding up a citizen on the East Side. A big ship, crowded with passengers, carrying millions and millions of dollars' worth of property, is as easy a prey as a hornless cow! Why, you do not even carry a policeman!"

"They're working on the registered mail now." In spite of his stoicism the voice of the purser grew tremulous. "What a thing to happen!"

"Do the passengers know?"

"No, none of them, and they're not to know. Anyway, the passengers are only brought into contact with the stewards, the purser and the chief steward. You're an ocean traveller—what do the passengers know, anyway? They never meet the captain or the ship's officers; they'll go on and on, unconscious of anything wrong, until—" he stopped.

"Were you going to say until the vessel reaches New York?"

"That was what I was going to say," said the purser. "But shall we reach New York?"

"I doubt it. They'll know when the gang go after their jewels."

"Why should they? The valuable jewels are kept in my safe; they're taken out every night. And the passengers' money is there, too," the purser groaned. "I've got orders to pay out any cash that the owners require, so that they shall not be suspicious, and the only change they've made is to prohibit the use of the boat deck. They've put a quartermaster at each gangway to stop people going up, and the elevator isn't allowed to work above B. deck." He wrung his hands in despair. "My God, what a horrible position!" he said. "Do you know what has happened to the captain?"

"I can guess," said Bill curtly.

"They've got four men in the engine-room. I don't know how many on the bridge. There are machine-guns covering the deck hands' quarters, guards on the provision store—everywhere, except where there's passengers to see them. The man who planned this was a genius."

It happened providentially that the Stones' steward had been taken ill the night before, and the appearance of a new man excited no unusual interest. Stone, who was still far from recovered from the attack upon him, had his breakfast served in his own stateroom, and this morning Betty joined him. She asked sympathetically about the missing steward, and Bill replied in monosyllables. He was desperately anxious that the girl should not recognise him, and when Betty looked at his face and asked him to carry a message to himself, he blessed the ingenious barber who had so completely changed his appearance.

The need for disguise was made apparent when he reached his own cabin and found two men making a very thorough search of the apartment. The bed had been thrown off, the wardrobe was open. One of the searchers turned to him as he came in—

"Where's Holbrook?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

Neither of them wore the conventional livery of the Proud Sons, and Bill guessed that those of the gang who it was absolutely necessary should be brought into contact with the passengers went undisguised so that the

travellers should not be alarmed. Afterwards he discovered that the raiders had entirely dispensed with their robes after the first attack. Bill, watching the searchers, wondered whether they expected to find the missing Holbrook concealed underneath the mattress, but wisely decided that it was not a moment for facetiousness.

"I don't know, sir; he hasn't been in his cabin all night."

"Don't you go telling him we're looking for him," said the other threateningly. "You've had your orders, steward?"

"Yes, sir," said Bill humbly, and went back to Betty, with a note that he had scribbled between the cabins, and which she read with a puzzled expression.

"Mr. Holbrook says we mustn't expect to see him for the next three days," she said, as she tossed the letter across to her uncle.

Mr. Stone read the note.

"Humph!" he said. "What is he doing with himself? I'll go along to his cabin."

"I don't think you'd better, sir," said Bill. He had cultivated a high falsetto voice that set Betty Carew's teeth on edge. "He said he didn't want to see anybody. I think he has had a radio from his office."

The girl and her uncle looked at one another.

"Perhaps he has some work to do," she said uneasily.

Bill went on deck to carry up the girl's cushion and book, and the deck steward, whom he met, glanced at him suspiciously.

"Hullo, where have you come from?" he asked.

"Ask no questions," snapped Bill, "and attend to your own business."

It was the only tone to adopt, and the steward fell into the natural error that the new man was one of the gang which he knew was in control of the *Escorial*. In the circumstances Bill could only marvel at the extraordinary discipline which such men as he displayed. By no secret confidence did they betray the danger in which these gaily clad men and women stood. It was no strange phe-

nomenon, however. He had travelled in ships where suicides and murders had been committed under his nose, which he had known nothing about until he had read the report of the inquest.

An idea occurred to him and he sought out the deck steward.

"I shall be helping you up here," he said, trying to impart a world of meaning into his tone.

The steward touched his cap.

"All right, sir," he said. "Excuse me if I was a little short with you, but I didn't tumble to you."

"None of the passengers knows?"

"No, sir; we've had strict orders to keep every bit of news from them. I must say," he said, with the reluctant admiration which the law-abiding have for the lawless, "you've managed the job very well!"

Bill growled an acknowledgment of this unsubtle flattery, and busied himself with the requirements of the loungers.

At eleven o'clock bouillon was served, and he helped the deck steward in its distribution. Clive Lowbridge refused the cup with a little grimace, and Bill smiled to himself when he saw, out of the tail of his eye, the ubiquitous Benson bearing a glass of seltzer water and a large biscuit to his master. The weather was not so warm as it had been. He saw the girl shiver and went down to her cabin and brought her furs.

"How very nice of you, steward!" said the girl in surprise as he put the cloak about her shoulders. "Have you seen Mr. Holbrook again?"

"Yes, Miss, I just met him in the alleyway. I think he has been writing."

She laughed softly.

"You haven't to be a detective to discover that, have you?" she said. "Poor Mr. Holbrook carries the marks of his profession."

"How?" asked Stone.

"Have you never seen the ink on his fingers?" she asked, and Bill went a fiery red. Fortunately she did not

observe his perturbation, and he hurried away, to examine in private his tell-tale fingers.

"Anyway, there's no ink on them now," he said, as he scrubbed away the last blue stains viciously.

When he returned, the deck steward called him aside and asked him to take up a tray to the bridge.

"Your governor wants another bottle of whisky," he said confidentially, "and I'll be glad if you would take it. I'm not a nervous man, but——"

Herein was to be the supreme test. If Laffin was in charge, the shrewd wits, no less than the keen vision, of that warped genius might reveal his identity. Apparently, stewards had no difficulty in reaching the boat deck, and he was not challenged when he carried the tray to the foot of the bridge ladder. A man whom he knew looked down at him.

"Bring it up," he said curtly, and Bill obeyed.

None of the three nondescripts who occupied the bridge wore either the robe of the Order or the uniform of officers. He in charge sported a brown Derby hat, and to add to the incongruity of his appearance he wore a pair of old golf breeches, thick woollen stockings and bright red slippers, which Bill remembered having seen in the captain's cabin. Any of the three might have walked out of a saloon on any sea front in the world. Sailormen undoubtedly; ex-officers probably, thought Bill, and toughs most certainly!

He bore the tray into what had been the captain's cabin, which was now occupied by a big man, who turned his head as Bill entered. Harvey Hale!

"Put it down, son," said the man gruffly. "All right below? None of the passengers squeaking, eh? What's your name?"

"Smithers," said Bill immediately.

"Well see here, Smithers, you can go tell your pals they're all right unless they start any monkey business. You know me—you know my name, don't you? Never sailed with me, eh?" "Harvey Hale—that's me. You'll remember my name?"

"Yes, sir," said Bill, saying what was required of him.

"That's good. You can tell the world you've met Harvey Hale—one of these days. The big man with the big ideas. Get that right, son—the big man with the big ideas! When you're boasting about how you've met me, don't forget that! Harvey Hale, the Big Man with the Big Ideas!"

CHANGED CONDITIONS

Bill looked at him curiously. The captain had changed for the worse since he had seen him last. He wore a pair of old khaki trousers and a golf coat buttoned up to his chin, over which he had a worn khaki overcoat which hung to his knees.

Suddenly his tone changed, and he became severely practical.

"Do you know a passenger named Holbrook? He was up here the other morning, but I missed him somehow."

"Yes, sir, I was looking after his cabin," said Bill. "I haven't seen him since morning—he's disappeared somewhere."

The corner of Harvey Hale's mouth lifted.

"And he'd better! That was a wise kid! Listen, boy, if you see him tell him to come right along to me."

"If I see him I shall certainly tell him that," said Bill, emboldened by the success of his disguise. "Better take me for your steward, captain. You don't want all sorts of fellows coming up and down carrying stories. You never know what they will talk about."

Hale seemed to take a favourable view of this, but, to Bill's surprise, would not come to a decision. From his attitude Holbrook was certain that, though this swaggering freebooter might boast of his position and his power, he was the subordinate of another, and had little or no real authority in his hands.

That afternoon, Bill discovered that, if the secret of the morning's adventures had been well kept, there was a feeling of suspicion abroad. The careless gaiety of the

passengers who thronged the deck was less marked. He saw grave faces, and one man, unknown to him, buttonholed him in the companionway and asked him if anything was wrong.

"No, sir," said Bill; "what do you mean?"

"Well, is there any trouble up above?" The passenger jerked his thumb in the direction of the heavens, but Bill guessed that he was referring to the bridge.

"Not that I know, sir."

"Somebody was hurt this morning," said the passenger, by no means reassured. "They say the captain's dead."

"I've heard nothing about it," said Bill, and escaped.

The unobservant travellers could hardly fail to observe one peculiar fact. They came up as usual from dinner, to find a remarkable change in conditions. Betty, who did not leave the saloon until ten o'clock (she had waited on, hoping that Bill would put in an appearance) uttered a little gasp of wonder as she stepped out on to the deck.

"We've dined very early," she said.

It was quite light. Every horizon was visible under the grey skies. She looked at her watch.

"Why," she said, "it is ten o'clock—ten o'clock at night and still light! And, my! how cold it is!"

She woke the next morning shivering, and hastily pulled her fur coat on to the bed. There was a knock at the door, and the new steward came in.

"I'm going to put on your radiator if you don't mind, Miss."

"An electric radiator in July!" she said jerkily, for she was chilled to the bone.

"It does seem queer," said the new steward. "I shouldn't get up, Miss, until this cabin is warm."

"Whatever has happened? Why is it so cold?" asked the muffled voice of the girl from beneath the clothes.

"I don't know," said Bill. "Probably because it snowed in the night. There's two inches of it on the upper deck!"

He was one of the few who knew that for twenty-eight hours the *Escorial,* leaving her course, had been steaming at full speed northward into the frozen seas of the Arctic!

BILL HAS A PLAN

THERE was nobody on deck when, putting on all the thick clothes he could requisition, he went up and viewed the amazing scene.

The *Escorial* had a maximum speed of thirty knots, and she had steamed considerably over seven hundred miles northward. He guessed that they were somewhere in the region of sixty degrees north. Every seat, every rope was coated with ice; the snow lay upon the rails, and gathered in little drifts in the well-deck forward. Far away, on the port bow, he thought he detected a small iceberg. The weather was clear, entirely free from fog; the sea remained smooth, and except for the intensity of the cold, there was nothing to indicate that the ship was on an unusual course. Icebergs are seen in July down as far as latitude 50. They have been met with, in rare instances, as far south as 40 in midsummer.

He had intended maintaining his disguise until something definite happened, but there was no longer any necessity for keeping his secret from Stone.

Apparently the men in control of the ship had also realised that their presence had now become public property. Bill heard the rattle of winches, and, going forward, saw that the muffled hands were bringing up passengers' heavy baggage. Soon after, the purser sent for him, and ordered him to pass on the information that passengers might open their heavy baggage and take out what clothing they required.

He had paid several visits to Bullott. The detective told him that so far he had not been molested, though the two men whom Bill had seen searching his own cabin had also made as thorough a search of Bullott's belongings.

"This move certainly puzzles me," said Bullott. "I knew, of course, they were steering north last night."

"There is a good reason," said Bill. "We shall be running into the fog belt later in the day, and whether we do

or not, we are well off the regular track of shipping. Unless we happen to be seen by a chance whaler or one of the Greenland trading ships, we shall have disappeared from human knowledge."

"But you can't steal a ship and hide it in the Arctic," protested Bullott.

"They're doing it," was the laconic reply. "Here's another point, Inspector: the farther north we go the less danger there is to the gang. The only possibility of recovering this ship is by a surprise attack in the night—there will be no night from now onward!"

"You mean it will be light all night, of course?"

This contingency had not occurred to the detective.

Bill's plan was already made. The key position was the wireless house. Once he was in possession, ten minutes at the keyboard, and all the well-laid plans of the Twenty-Third Degree would come to naught. But he had already noted that the wireless house was guarded; he had seen a man sitting in a deck chair near the door, and the operator was presumably armed. His only chance would come in one of those dense white fogs which are common in these seas.

He hurried away to find Betty's baggage, and had singular good fortune, for the Stones' boxes were almost the first to come out of the hold. With the help of a steward, he got these down to D. deck and into the sitting-room, to Betty's joy, for she was shivering in her fur coat before the electric radiator, and Mr. Stone, with a blanket over his thin suit, was walking up and down the little stateroom, trying to get warm.

"What is this, steward?" he asked in surprise, as Bill came in, dragging the first of the big trunks, and he could have fallen on his neck when he explained.

The steward had something else to tell, and after he had finished, Betty took him by the shoulder and brought his face toward the light of the porthole, more interested in the change that the ingenious barber had brought about than in her own deadly peril.

"It isn't you, Billy?" she said. "Your hair——"

"It will take me years to get out the henna!" groaned Bill. "No man has ever made such a sacrifice for a girl as I have made for you."

She dropped her hand from his shoulder, and for a moment was convulsed with silent laughter. Mr. Stone, however, was less amused.

"Where do we finish—at the North Pole?" he asked. "Why, this is criminal! Half the wretched passengers will die of cold and starvation."

"They will be all right so long as the oil lasts," said Bill, "but what will happen if we get frozen in, and the oil supply goes west, I shudder to think about."

"But the food?"

"I don't think there's any immediate danger there. Did I ever tell you about Toby Marsh's mystery? He said that food and firearms were being shipped to New York. Well, that was part of the scheme. Somewhere in the hold is a big supply of canned food and flour. The arms, I presume, are rifles and munitions for the gang—it would have been pretty difficult for them to have brought these on board in any other way."

"But, Billy, you're wonderful!" She was gazing spellbound into his face. "Where are your other eyebrows. And to think that you've been coming in and out of the cabin since yesterday morning, and I haven't recognised you!"

He helped them to unpack, and Stone went off to find Lowbridge, whose one trunk the new steward had retrieved. All Clive's radiators were on; he was wearing a heavy, fur-lined coat.

"Benson is providence!" he exclaimed. "I've been roasting him ever since we left town for bringing this incubus, but he had an idea that the nights in America were cold, and insisted upon taking it along. I didn't know I had it until I saw it hanging in the wardrobe."

"One would almost think that Benson expected a visit to the Arctic Circle," said Stone drily.

Clive scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"That didn't occur to me, but it certainly is a remark-

able coincidence. I should never suspect anything of—by Jove, I wonder!"

He looked at Stone, and Stone's eyes surveyed the providential fur-lined coat with a reflective eye. As he was going out he met Benson. The valet wore two heavy sweaters under his coat, and gave him, in his customary respectful way, a sedate good-morning.

"You seem to have been prepared for this cold spell, Benson?"

"Yes, sir, it is rather remarkable that the weather should change. When do we reach New York, sir?"

"I'd like to be able to tell you," said Stone.

He went back to Bill, and behind the bolted door there was a council of war, the third member of which was the girl. Stone told the story of the fur coat.

"Clive ought to know," she said, but here Bill was firm.

"In ordinary circumstances I should say yes," he replied, "but Lord Lowbridge has a servant, whose foresight is a little disturbing. I don't think that he should know who I am. Why should Benson imagine that it would be cold in America? He has been there before."

"That certainly looks fishy," said Stone thoughtfully. "Benson is a queer bird—those quiet, suave men are usually deep. What are we to do, Holbrook?"

"I'll agree to another man being brought into our confidence. If you don't mind, I would like you to go along and see the ship's doctor, whose help will be necessary if my scheme is to be successful."

When Stone had gone and he was alone with the girl. . . .

"Betty—I'm going to call you Betty—you don't mind?"

She shook her head.

"You have that pistol which Bullott gave you?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"And if necessary you will use it—on anybody who attempts to harm you . . . yes, there is that possibility. Laffin is aboard, and is in control of the ship. He hasn't

interfered with you or your uncle yet because he has his hands full with other matters. You told me the other day that you were to be an heiress after all; what did you mean by that?"

"I mean uncle told me that I was his only living relative, and his money must come to me eventually—he made a will in my favour before we left England."

Bill nodded slowly.

"That accounts for the attack made on him. Laffin knows!"

"But that is impossible—how could he?"

"Laffin knows," he insisted. "He has sources of information of which we do not dream. You're Laffin's wife—if you are an heiress, he is the husband of an heiress. Betty, if anything happens to me——"

The look that came to her face hurt and pleased him.

"To you?" she said, in a frightened voice. "Oh, Billy, nothing will happen to you?"

"Anything is possible. I'm not trying to scare you—and I don't think, anyway, that you're easily scared. I wish—you don't know how badly I wish—to give you courage. But you have to face every possibility, Betty, my dear."

He took her face in his hands and looked hungrily into her eyes.

"I never dreamt—I never hoped—" he said huskily, and then, before he realised what he was doing, he had kissed her.

The sound of a handle turning checked the torrent of words that came to his lips, and Mr. Stone came in, to find a very breathless, rather pale young man, standing awkwardly and guiltily before his niece.

"Here is the doctor. I've told him a little," said Stone as he bolted the door. "He probably thinks I am mad—maybe you will be able to convince him."

The ship's doctor, a man of middle age, was not as sceptical as Bill had expected.

"I knew, of course, that the ship's course had been altered," he said, "and, in common with the purser, I

learnt that these blackguards were in control. Mr. Stone says that you want my assistance. What is your plan?"

Holbrook's scheme had taken shape that morning.

"I must get into the wireless house. I understand radio fairly well, and I used to be an expert telegraphist," said Bill. "That was part of my early training when I was working in America. But to get into that caboose means that we must overcome the guard, and the only way we can do that and escape a fuss is to dope him."

Dr. Speer shook his head.

"If you gave them a slow dope it would take too long to work—" he began.

"I don't want a slow dope, I suggest something swift and sudden," interrupted Bill. "I expect they will allow me to go on the bridge to take refreshments. At any rate, I have asked Hale for the job. They have no regular steward except the men who are looking after their cabins on the boat deck. Even if Hale doesn't agree, I can go up without being questioned—and that I intend doing the moment we strike a fog bank—I don't care what they discover after I've sent the message."

Speer pursed his lips; it was a new experience for a respectable medical practitioner.

"Butyl is the stuff you want," he said, "and I have a quantity of that in store—I'll make certain. You will be taking a big risk, young man."

"We are taking risks as it is," said Bill impatiently. "You do not know the men we are dealing with."

The doctor went away, and returned almost immediately with a fluted green flask, the stopper of which was sealed.

"Here is the stuff," he said, and gave Holbrook a brief lecture on the dose and method of administration. "I have not used it for a nefarious purpose, but I believe it is a drug commonly used by thugs who wish to bring their victims to a state of immediate insensibility."

Bill slipped the bottle in his pocket and went out. It was not advisable that he should be seen too much in the Stones' cabin; they, of all passengers, would be most

closely watched, and he more than suspected that one of the stewards on this deck was associated with the pirates. The man had made a sudden appearance on this part of the ship, and, when ordered to return to the steerage, where he belonged, had flatly refused. Later, the purser received an intimation that the man was not to be disturbed.

In one sense his strangeness to the saloon portion of the *Escorial* worked to the advantage of Holbrook, for the steerage stewards had special quarters, and he was not able to judge whether Bill was a stranger or one of the ship's company.

In the course of the day he made two visits to the forbidden deck, once in company with another steward, when they took up and opened a case of whisky for the use of the new officers, and once he carried tea to the quartermaster of the watch.

He could not but admire the perfect organisation which had made this coup possible. Duties were being carried out without a hitch. A new set of quartermasters had appeared, and though the man at the wheel was no longer a neatly uniformed sailor, but a nondescript figure dressed in a soiled leather jacket such as is used by motorists, and smoking a short clay pipe, the man was apparently as efficient as the sailor he had relieved.

It was on his second visit that he was the witness of a spectacle which would remain with him to the end of his days. He had not seen Laffin since the night when the apparition had appeared in his cabin. For some reason the doctor was keeping out of sight. But that he was on board and in command, he knew, and the position he occupied was revealed when Hale, watching the opening of the whisky case, had ordered one of the men to take a bottle to "the Commodore's state-room." Bill grinned inwardly at this description of his enemy. But how seriously Laffin took his duties, he was to learn.

On his second visit he had put down the tray and had filled the teacups with steaming liquid, when Hale's voice called him into the chart-house. The big man was leaning

over an Admiralty chart on the table, a pair of compasses in his hand, and an open book by his side.

"Steward, go down to the purser and tell him I want a full list of the provisions on board to the last ounce," he said. "And ask him to break Number Four hold and get out all cases consigned to the Westbury Corporation of New York."

Bill touched his cap and, going down, passed the instructions to the purser. He had guessed right about the provisions. How curious it was that Toby Marsh, knowing so much of Laffin's plans, had not revealed a little more, he thought, until he remembered that scene of reconciliation which had been witnessed on the Bath Road.

IN THE WIRELESS HOUSE

He returned to the bridge with the information that he had fulfilled his errand, and that the list could be placed in Hale's hands before the evening. It seemed an opportunity, he thought, when he reached the boat deck, to make a reconnaissance of the wireless house. The guard was still at the door as he walked past; he saw the glow of the valve lamp through the cabin window.

The wireless cabin was steel built and was sited on a raised platform. On three sides and near the roof were long, narrow windows of toughened glass, that nearest and facing the bridge commanding an uninterrupted view of the bridge companionway. All this he noted and memorised.

Bill was curious to see how the gang had disposed of their prisoners, the ship's officers. He guessed that the big gymnasium was their prison-house, and his view was confirmed when he saw the two sentries standing before the door.

"Where are you going?" one called sharply.

"To the aft gangway, sir," said Bill.

The man jerked his thumb towards the bridge.

"Go forrard," he ordered.

Bill was about to turn, when the door of one of the aft cabins opened and a man came out. For a second Holbrook gaped at him, paralysed with amazement. It was the figure of a naval officer in full dress; a gold-laced cocked hat was on his head, and the tightly-fitting tail-coat blazed with decorations and orders. A broad strip of gold ran the length of his trouser seams, and a naval sword dangled at his waist.

For a moment he thought that he was suffering from some extraordinary illusion, and then the strangely attired form moved towards him, and Bill's senses were so strained that he could hear the creak of the enamelled boots.

Under the man's arm was a telescope—but for that he might have been walking across the yard of St. James's Palace after a levee.

Laffin! But a transfigured Laffin. His breast was swollen, his chin held high.

"What do you want, my man?" he asked.

Bill recovered his shattered wits and touched his hat obsequiously.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, in his falsetto, "but I was going to the aft gangway; they tell me it's closed."

"Go forrard, my man, go forrard," said the doctor, almost pleasantly, and then, as he was moving away: "What do those folks think downstairs?"

Now, 'downstairs' is a term that is never used on board ship except by the veriest amateur, certainly never by the admiral whose uniform Laffin was wearing, and Bill had some difficulty in keeping a straight face.

"They don't know very much, sir. They're wondering why it has turned so cold."

Dr. Laffin smiled.

"I suppose they are, I suppose they are," he mused. "Whom do you look after, my friend—you are a steward, are you not?"

"Mr. Stone, sir."

The doctor's eyebrows went up.

"Indeed? Mr. Lambert Stone and his beautiful niece?

That is very interesting. And how do Mr. Lambert Stone and his beautiful niece accommodate themselves to the change? An experience for that young lady, one thinks, a remarkable experience!"

With a lordly wave of his hand he dismissed the steward, and Bill breathed more freely when he had reached the deserted promenade deck.

The passengers were now thoroughly alarmed. There had been something of a mutiny in the second-class saloon, suppressed ruthlessly by three of the gangsters who had been hastily summoned at the first sign of disorder.

With evening a cold wind sprang up that made the deck a most undesirable spot. Those who had to run the gauntlet to the crowded smoke-room came shivering to the big fires which burnt at either end, and told stories of icy alleyways and cabins where bed was the only warm place.

At nine o'clock, when the passengers went to dinner that night, they discovered that the menu had been cut in half.

There was yet another development, favourable to Holbrook's plan. He was tidying the Stones' cabin when he felt the speed of the *Escorial* slacken, and, going up on deck, found the ship enveloped in a clinging white mist. Now was his opportunity, and, as luck would have it, he saw the deck steward carrying a tray toward the boat deck.

"I'll take that," he said. "Who is it for?"

"It is for the bridge," said the man, apparently relieved that Bill had volunteered for the duty. "The officers are to have hot food every hour."

Bill went up the companion and put the tray on the deck. The fog was so thick that from where he stood he could not see the bridge or the wireless house. There was no time to be lost. His numbed fingers detached two cups from the dozen with which the tray was laden, he splashed in the hot coffee, sugared and milked the decoction, and then, taking the bottle from his pocket, he

dropped a liberal dose into each cup. Taking one in each hand, he groped his way to the wireless house. The men on duty saw him coming and challenged him.

"The captain sent you a drink," said Bill.

"It's about time he did!" growled the man. "What's the other cup for—the operator?"

He opened the door of the room.

"Here's a drink for you, Arthur," he said, and the muffled figure of the operator appeared in the doorway and took the cup from Bill's hand.

Not waiting to see the effect of the drug, Holbrook hurried back to where he had left the tray and carried it on to the bridge and into the chart-house. The bridge was now alive with men; he heard Harvey Hale cursing loudly the change in the weather, and then:

". . . it is only a belt, and anyway, we're more than fifty miles from where we arranged to pick up the *Inland*. . . ."

They were making for a rendezvous. This possibility had not occurred to Bill. Even as he thought, he heard another of the men speak.

"We'll have to wait for her, won't we, captain? She couldn't keep up with us; none of these tankers do more than ten knots."

"She does twenty-five," said Hale. "The *Thomas Inland* is one of the new fast. . . ." The voice rumbled down unintelligibly, until: ". . . told them to rig up a dummy funnel and paint her white. . . ."

The *Thomas Inland!*

Where had he heard that name? And then in a flash he remembered the wireless news bulletin that had been posted. The *Escorial* was to be met by the stolen tanker! So that was why the gang were so inactive. The tanker would not carry enough oil to supply the needs of the *Escorial* unless. . . .

Bill almost stopped as the horrible possibility occurred to him. She would have enough oil to carry the gang and their loot to safety! The *Escorial* was to be abandoned—driven into the ice-fields, and the three thousand souls she

carried left to starvation and death, whilst the *Thomas Inland* made her innocent way to a port with her booty.

He flew down the ladder, stumbled through the fog towards the wireless house, and had only to come in sight of the guard to know that the dope had worked. The man lay, an inert figure, outside the open door of the caboose.

Bill did not hesitate; lifting him, he dragged him to the side of the ship, and, balancing the man on the rail, flung him into the dark waters. This was not the moment to consider the value of human life. Three thousand people were heading straight for a hideous death. It mattered little whether one or the other of the gang were drowned or hanged.

The second man lay sprawled across his desk, and, hoisting him on to his shoulders, Bill staggered to the rail, and, without one tremor of regret, flung him into the unseen sea. The cups and saucers followed. In another second he was in the caboose, his frozen fingers working at the keys, a headphone clamped to his ears.

As he called his eyes wandered over the papers with which the table was littered. There were messages from the English Admiralty and from the American Naval Secretary, calling on all ships to report the movements of the *Escorial*. Tappity-tap went the key restlessly, and presently he heard a faint answer, in the code of Cape Cod. He tapped off the message:

> "*Escorial* in the hands of gangsters. Position roughly 64 north, 45 west, heading north. Notify *Sussex* and *Kent*. S.O.S."

There was a pause, and then the reply came through:

> "*Sussex, Kent* and three fast American cruisers looking for you. Their position 60 north, 46 west. Notifying them."

Almost as soon as the message finished he picked up another signal. It was from the *Kent,* obviously addressed to the distant *Sussex:*

"Have taken message from *Escorial*. She bears north-east by north from me. Give me her direction."

He did not hear the *Sussex* reply, but after four or five minutes came the *Kent* again:

"Proceeding with all speed. Notify nearest American cruiser."

Bill took off his headphones with a sense of elation, and at that moment somebody tried the door of the caboose, and a rough voice demanded:

"What are you doing in there?"

THE "THOMAS INLAND"

THE caboose had three windows, one port, one starboard, and the other facing the bridge. All, however, were so placed that it was difficult for anybody outside to look in—for which Bill was truly grateful.

He climbed up to the port window opposite the door, fumbled for the fastening screw, and, using all his strength, forced it open. In another second he was on the deck and running lightly towards the aft part of the ship. He knew that the companionway was guarded—he could not afford to take a chance of escaping the vigilant sentinel. To go past the gymnasium must also lead to detection, for men were on duty there. Slipping over the rail, he swung himself to the deck below. It was an eerie experience, hanging suspended there in the mist, and it required all his courage to swing inward and release his hold, for the fog was so dense that he could not see where he was landing.

Would Hale suspect the steward who had brought up the tray? He must risk that too. Making his way to D. deck, he saw Stone for a moment, and, going along to the cabin which had been allotted to him, he hid the bottle and went back to wait developments. They were not long in coming.

Suddenly he heard four short blasts from the steamer's siren: it was the signal to muster all hands.

"This is where I become a stowaway or something," said Bill.

He fell in with the other stewards on the lower promenade deck, and after half-an-hour's wait, he saw the towering bulk of Harvey Hale coming along, scrutinising the line, man by man. He stopped before Bill.

"You're the steward who came to the bridge with tea, ain't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Bill.

"What were you doing on the boat deck?"

The very question told Holbrook that the new captain did no more than suspect—if he had known, there would have been no question.

"On the boat deck, sir?" said Bill. "I don't know what you mean; I had to go to the boat deck to reach the bridge."

"Did you come back to the promenade straight away?"

"Yes, sir."

"The man on watch at the foot of the ladder said you didn't."

It was the moment for a bold bluff.

"There was no man at the foot of the ladder when I came down, sir," said Bill.

It was a desperate lie, but it succeeded. Hale turned, with a curse, to his companion.

"That comes of putting a dirty longshoreman on duty!" he swore. "I know he wasn't there. He wasn't there when I came down myself!"

"He was cold," said the other, his voice trembling. It was evident that the "officers" were in terror of their brutal commander.

"Cold!" yelled Hale. "He could freeze for an hour, couldn't he?"

A few minutes after, the muster was dismissed, and Bill went back to his cabin, a greatly relieved young man. The absence of the wireless operator and his guard had been discovered.

The ship was now moving dead slow, and once everybody on board felt a shiver and a jar, whilst at about eleven o'clock that night she must have touched an iceberg; for a moment the vessel heeled over and Bill thought that the worst had happened. But there was some justification for Harvey Hale's claim that he was the greatest seaman in the world, for all that happened apparently was the merest graze, and scarcely bent a plate, and an hour later the ship ran out of the fog.

There was ice everywhere—great masses of hummock ice like floating islands; bigger bulks that stood up from the sea like white cathedrals.

By this time Bill guessed, rather than knew, that a vigorous search had been undertaken to find the men he had thrown overboard. Evidently something even more serious had happened, for an order came that the promenade deck was closed to passengers.

The *Escorial* was now going at full speed, and in the grey light of midnight Holbrook saw, through the porthole of the Stones' cabin, that the sea was now comparatively free from ice.

He snatched a few hours' sleep, and at five o'clock he was in the "H" suite sitting-room. Here was the chief danger: Lambert Stone was a doomed man. Twice in his search for easy wealth had Joshua Laffin been baffled. The murder of his patron had not brought him the money that he had every right to expect would accrue to him. His scheme to gain control of the finances of the Proud Sons of Ragousa had been thwarted by Pawter. To-day, for the first time in his life, there were untold millions in his hands, and the insurance of a rich wife, if this, the most desperate of all his deeds, should fail.

He took along Lord Lowbridge's coffee, but might have saved himself the trouble, for Benson had forestalled him, and Clive, wrapped in a heavy overcoat, was sitting up in bed when Bill went in.

"Benson tells me that the ship is in the hands of a gang. Is that true, steward?"

"Quite true, sir," said Bill.

"Good Lord!" An expression of amazement was on Clive's handsome face. "It doesn't seem possible. How far are we from New York now?"

"About three thousand miles," said Bill. "Is there anything you require?"

"No, thank you, steward. Have you had any news of Mr. Holbrook?"

Bill had ready a new explanation for his own absence.

"He must have found a warmer cabin—he complained about the cold."

"Can't understand what has happened to him." Clive ruffled his hair impatiently. "You don't think he has fallen overboard?"

"That is unlikely, my lord," said Bill, and got away from the cabin as soon as he could.

Early in the afternoon, the *Escorial's* engines stopped, and Bill saw that they were taking soundings from the bridge, and apparently these were satisfactory to Hale, for presently the big port anchor dropped with a roar.

And now, when the noise of the engines ceased, the perfect stillness was bewildering. The slightest whisper sounded like the sound of shouting. Holbrook understood for the first time what explorers meant when they talked of the "Arctic hush."

Ice had again appeared; huge bergs were visible on every side. Two white seals rested on a floe that came slowly past the ship as she lay at anchor, and one of the stewards told him that, a few hours before she stopped, the *Escorial* had passed an enormous iceberg, on which a bear had been seen.

The cold was deadly, and it was accentuated by the wind that blew from the north, that presently brought something like a blizzard, which covered the ship from masts to deck in a coat of powdery snow.

His duty carried him to the purser's cabin. The stout man was shivering over his little electric radiator, and cursing the day that he had left Southampton.

"Another three days' steaming and we pretty well clear out our supply of fuel," he said in a low voice. "Our only

chance is to stay anchored. At any rate, there's enough oil on board to keep the dynamos going for two months."

"At the end of two months what will happen?"

"We shall be frozen in," said the purser emphatically. "I shouldn't be surprised if we didn't get iced up in a month! I don't know what they're doing: they're simply cutting their own throats coming here."

Bill told him of the supply ship and the message he had sent—news that brought the purser to life.

"It was you, was it? I heard all about it. They lost two men; what happened to them?"

"They committed suicide," said Bill coolly. "Mr. Jackson, suppose the gang abandons us? Would there be enough oil to get us back to the track of shipping?"

The purser shook his head.

"If there was we couldn't make it," he said. "They've been all morning examining the engines with the idea of putting the machinery out of order. Oh, they've been thorough! By the way, the passengers are rationed for to-morrow—tinned beef and mutton, dried peas and beans—all fresh meat has been taken for Hale's men."

The two days which followed were a nightmare to Bill. On the first of those, three passengers in the steerage died of cold and exposure, and on the following day a man in the second class saloon went mad and attacked his fellow travellers. The shadow of tragedy lay on the ship, and, looking up at her huge funnels and towering masts, and visualising the enormous bulk of her, Bill could pinch himself in an effort to wake from the fearful dream. The thing was so fantastical, so utterly impossible. Here was a ship, the largest in the world, stolen more easily than a sneak-thief could take a watch on a race-track! It was unbelievable.

On the evening of the second day the deck steward came to him in a state of excitement.

"There's a ship in sight," he said.

"A warship?" said Bill, his heart leaping.

The man shook his head.

"No, she looks like a tanker to me."

Bill's jaw dropped. He knew, before the ungainly craft came slowly within a few cables' length of the liner, that it was the *Thomas Inland,* and that the supreme hour of danger was at hand.

HARVEY HALE AND LAFFIN

From the lower promenade deck he saw the ship come to an anchor, watched the lowering of a boat and the skin-coated crew pull towards the liner. A gangway had been lowered, and presently a man staggered inboard and went clumping up the steps on to the deck, being received by Hale, who took him straight away to the bridge.

The consultation was a long one, and it was nearly nine o'clock before the captain of the *Thomas Inland* went back to his ship, and such passengers whose portholes faced that way saw her get up her anchor and sidle in towards the liner. She was made fast by midnight, and Bill waited to see whether his fears were well-founded. If the tanker passed a pipe aboard to replenish the nearly empty tanks of the *Escorial,* then Laffin's plan was something different from that which he anticipated. But no attempt was made to oil the ship, and, watching them, Bill saw the forward derricks in action. They were lowering on to the deck of the tanker the boxes which had been taken from the purser's strong-room. Bill waited only long enough to see this, then went back to Stone.

The American was sitting despondently on a settee, a rug over his legs, his hands thrust into his greatcoat pockets.

"Where is Betty?" asked Bill. It was not the moment for conventionality.

"She's in her cabin—why?"

"I want her to come with me."

He knocked on the door and Betty came out.

"Put on your coat," ordered Bill, and, when she had obeyed, he led her along the alleyway to his own cabin.

He had spent the previous night with an axe and a screwdriver. The brackets which fastened the wash-stand to the wall had been removed. He pulled at the piece of furniture and dragged it aside, disclosing a small, irregularly shaped aperture, heading apparently into a large linen cupboard, though it was now empty and had not been used that voyage.

"Stay in this cabin until I tell you to come out. I will lock the door on you and bring you food. It is absolutely vital that you should not make your presence known. Should anybody try the door, get into the linen cupboard and pull the wash-stand to you."

Before Betty could reply, somebody in the alleyway called Bill by his assumed name. He hurried out, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket.

"Where's Mr. Stone?" It was the purser. "He is wanted at once on the bridge, and Miss Stone also."

"I haven't seen him," lied Bill. "Maybe he's down in the saloon or the drawing-room."

"Go find him," said the purser impatiently. "That devil up above is raising Cain."

Bill remained in the library long enough to satisfy the purser, and returned with the message that neither Stone nor his niece could be seen.

"Go up and tell him yourself," groaned the purser, and without the slightest trepidation Bill interviewed the raging Harvey Hale.

He was dumbfounded to discover that at least one member of the party was a prisoner. Clive Lowbridge sat in the chart-house, a dejected man, his wrists fastened with a pair of ship's irons.

"Go down and tell that purser of yours that if he doesn't produce the Stones I'll cut his heart out of him!" yelled Hale.

He had been drinking heavily, and in spite of his boast that liquor had no effect upon him, his voice was thick and his step unsteady.

"What is this, what is this?" asked a testy voice, and, looking round, Bill saw Laffin entering the chart-house.

He still wore his gaudy uniform, and though it was mainly covered by a naval greatcoat he contrived to show the hilt of his sword through a slit in the side of the garment.

"That is not the way, my friend. I will have these matters done in my own way, which is naturally the best way. You are speaking of my wife and her respected relation. Let me send a message to her, a polite message, and an escort befitting her dignity. You understand, Hale?"

"I don't understand anything," growled the man, "except that I want those people on this bridge and I'm going to get 'em here!"

Dr. Laffin waved a dignified hand.

"You are no longer in control. I, your Commodore, your Grand Master, the supreme authority of the Twenty-Third Degree. . . ."

Bill saw Hale bend forward, as though in the act of bowing. Then came the quick, bright flash of a knife. Twice the man struck, and with a cough Joshua Laffin, doctor of medicine, fell on to his knees, swayed for a second, and Hale struck for the third time. The old man went down, and did not move again.

Thus passed Joshua Laffin, in his sin and his madness.

WARSHIPS

"THROW it overboard," said Hale curtly.

The shock of the deed had sobered him; his face was the colour of putty.

"Step lively, damn you!"

The man leapt at his word. Bill, standing in the chart-house, heard the click of the sword as it dragged along the deck . . . there was a loud splash. It was so horribly matter-of-fact a proceeding that Bill could not believe that he had witnessed a murder.

"Now, young fellow, get down and tell the purser to come himself, and to bring with him the Stones, do you hear?"

"I hear," said Bill steadily.

"You're the man that was up here the night my two fellows disappeared?" Hale was looking at him with a new interest through his half-closed eyes. "What's your name?"

"Smithers," said Bill.

"Well, go down, Mr. Blooming Smithers, and come back with the Stones. I'd like a word with you."

Holbrook gave a quick glance round; every man of the party was armed. He could have killed Harvey Hale then and there, but there were too many for him. He might shoot down three, he calculated coldly, but the fourth or the fifth would get him.

"Here!" Hale called him back. "I want a wireless operator. Do you understand radio?"

"No, sir."

"Understand morse, though, don't you?"

It dawned upon Bill at that moment that in all probability the captain of the *Thomas Inland* had also picked up his message.

"No, sir, I don't understand morse. Several of the stewards do, though."

"Humph!" said Hale, and jerked his head.

He was apparently not satisfied to let Bill go alone, for, looking round, the reporter saw that he was closely followed by two of Hale's subordinates. Despite his apparent coolness, his head was in a whirl. Joshua Laffin was dead! He met the purser at the foot of the companion stairway, and gave his message.

"It's no use, Holbrook," said the man in a low voice. "I know where the Stones are. I went into the linen store, looking for a place to hide, and saw them. They wouldn't last a minute there. They searched that place when you disappeared."

Bill's heart sank. He ran along the alleyway, opened the door of his cabin and called the girl and her uncle out.

"I agree with the purser—you'll be found in the cabin. The only chance we have is on the boat deck," he said.

As they walked along the corridor he told the news of Joshua Laffin's murder.

"How horrible!" she said in a low voice. "Yet—yet my first thought——"

He nodded and gripped her arm.

"A couple of Hale's men are at the companion," he said. "We shan't have another opportunity of talking. I want you to follow me wherever I go. Have you the pistol?"

She showed him the bag in her hand.

"It is certain to be necessary; I hope it will be effective," he said grimly.

He led the way along the deck, Stone and the girl following him, and the two gangsters bringing up the rear.

"Go ahead," he said, when they came to the foot of the ladder that gave to the boat deck.

Stone went first, the girl after, then came Bill, and following him his two custodians. He reached the head of the steps, and, turning suddenly, dashed his boot in the chest of the nearest man. He dropped with a yell, bringing down his companion.

"This way!" shouted Holbrook, and flew across the deck towards the wireless caboose.

The man on duty at the door whipped a revolver from his pocket, but before he could press the trigger Holbrook shot him down. In another instant he was in the cabin, and the new operator did not show fight; he dropped his gun and put up his hands at the moment of their entrance.

"Outside," said Bill tersely, and kicked him on to the deck.

He dragged Betty into the cover of the cabin, and when Stone had followed, the reporter shut the door and pushed the bolts. With the butt of his pistol he smashed the three glass windows. He had seen that, from the wireless room, and standing on the operator's table, he could cover both bridges—a fact which one of the gang was to discover, for incautiously coming into view, Bill dropped him with a bullet through his knee, and the

yell of the wounded man was excellent propaganda as a deterrent to imitators.

"They'll try to starve us out, but I don't think they'll make any direct attack. Thank God, there's no night in these regions—I never dreamt I should be thankful for that!"

The operator had left behind him on the table two large naval revolvers, and they made a welcome addition to the armament of the party. He handed one to Stone.

"Take that and cover the left ladder; I'll look after the right," said Bill. "Shoot anybody you see—you cannot make a mistake."

"Can I do anything?" asked Betty quietly. "I'm not afraid—look!" She put out her hand, and to Bill's amazement it did not tremble.

"For the moment you had better keep out of range. This caboose is made of steel and ought to resist an ordinary rifle bullet. Our danger is from the rear, where we cannot see an attack coming."

The real danger, he discovered, was from the roof, for presently they heard a patter of feet overhead and the blow of an axe clanging against the iron roof.

"It would require the skill of Mr. Toby Marsh to make an entrance that way," said Bill coolly.

It was queer that he should think of Toby Marsh at that moment, yet several times that day the man had come to his mind. Was he, with Laffin, the mysterious force which directed the blow of Harvey Hale's knife? For this was clear, that the big man was acting under orders, and somehow he could not think of Laffin as leader.

The blows on the roof ceased, the footsteps sounded no more; but presently they came again, dragging something heavy. Suddenly the nozzle of a hosepipe was thrust in through the broken window and paid out furiously. Before Bill could gather the pipe and fling it out of the window there was ample time for the cabin to have been flooded, but no water came, and he wondered if there had been a blunder somewhere.

"The pipes are frozen." It was Stone who supplied the explanation.

"They'll try smoke next," said Bill. "I can only pray that they haven't a Mills bomb on board."

She shivered at his cold-bloodedness.

"You said they had taken Clive? What will they do to him?"

"I don't know. He is a prisoner in the chart-house," said Bill. "They will probably use him as either a lever or an ambassador."

It was a shrewd guess. Some time later, after a long lull, the figure of Clive appeared at the top of the bridge steps. He was still handcuffed; the look of bewilderment which Bill had seen on his face had intensified, so that there was something almost comic in his embarrassment. Bill felt a little pang of pleasure, in spite of the seriousness of the situation, that his rival should appear at such a disadvantage and was instantly ashamed of his meanness.

"Don't come down. What do you want?" shouted Bill.

From where he stood he could see not only the bridge, but had a good view beneath the bridge, across to the bow of the anchored *Escorial,* which was swinging idly in the tide.

"I have a message for you," shouted Clive, with a dismal attempt at cheerfulness. "Don't plug me—I'm doing my best!"

"Tell the others to keep back," warned Bill, and watched his lordship descend the ladder with painful slowness.

Presently he stood under the broken window.

"They say that if you'll surrender, there'll be no further trouble. Hale has killed the doctor—you know that? Now he talks about going back, turning State's evidence, and handing the ship over to the New York police authorities."

"Loud cheers," said Bill sarcastically. "Do you believe that?"

"I'm blest if I know what to think, Holbrook," said

Clive. "They threatened to hang me at the yardarm or some other beastly place, unless I can induce you to do as they wish! They say you can go back to your cabin and that no further attempt will be made on you. Naturally they're anxious about their own skins."

"I'll not do it!"

Lowbridge looked round fearfully.

"I'd ask you to let me in, only I'm afraid these devils would shoot me. They've got me covered. Honestly, I believe Hale is scared sick."

"In which case he can get up his anchor and steam south," said Bill. "We can travel just as comfortably in this caboose as we can in the luxury of suite H." Then, with a gasp: "Who told you who I was?" he demanded.

"They know. Personally, I shouldn't have recognised you. Gosh! if I ever get out of this I'll never come to sea again, even if I have to settle down in America! What shall I tell them?" he asked after a pause.

"What I said. If he turns the ship south, we go south too, whether we're here or in suite H. I don't trust him, and you'll be a fool if you do. Why does he threaten to hang you if he's square?"

"Because apparently he wants your good word. He seems to have an inordinate faith in the power of the press——"

Bill's derisive laughter interrupted him.

"Am I a child?" he said. "I'm sorry if you're running any risks—I don't think you are, Lowbridge, because he'll not put his threat into execution. But you must tell him that I'm staying here till we reach somewhere in the region of 45 degrees north. He has enough oil to strike the track of steamers."

The disconsolated Clive returned to the bridge.

"What will they do now? You don't think Clive is in any danger?" asked Stone anxiously.

"If they're serious about hanging him I may change my mind, but for the moment we stay here."

The vessel was still swinging. A big iceberg which had been in view through the port window had disappeared,

and a newer and smaller berg was slowly coming into sight as the great vessel leisurely circled her anchor. Suddenly Bill, who had been watching the bridge, dropped to the floor, seized a pair of binoculars that he had seen on a shelf, and leapt up to the table again.

Far away on that sector of the horizon which was now in view, were three blurs of smoke, and through the powerful glasses he distinguished them. He did not know the *Kent* from the *Sussex,* but the third vessel with a lattice mast was a United States warship, or he had never seen one!

TOWARD THE FOG

"WHAT is it?" asked Stone.

For answer, Bill beckoned him to the table and handed him the glasses.

Somebody else had seen the ship. He heard Hale roar an order, and in a few minutes a rattle and quiver as the anchor of the *Escorial* was dragged from its bed. The telegraphs were clanging, and presently came the purr of the turbines as the *Escorial* went slowly astern.

There were signs of activity also on the *Thomas Inland.* She had not been anchored, but was lashed fast to the side of her big companion. As the vessels drew away from one another, the *Thomas Inland* turned slowly westward, and, with a bubble of foam above her propeller, began to push a bigger distance between herself and the great liner.

A stentorian voice hailed her from the bridge.

"Keep close company, Hackett! I may want to oil. . . ."

Incautiously Hale showed himself for a second at the head of the ladder. Bill fired, saw the man stagger for a moment, and thought he was hit. He turned a face grinning with rage to the caboose, shook his fist and dived suddenly out of sight.

Nearly half-an-hour passed before the *Escorial* got under way. Bill was looking at the warships in an agony

of apprehension. They did not seem to be moving, and yet he knew they were nearer than when he had first sighted them.

As the *Escorial* turned, they came into view through the port window, and from the centre ship, which was in fact the *Kent,* a puff of white smoke crawled lazily. With startling distinctness in that silent Arctic sea came the boom of her gun. Something struck the water between the *Thomas Inland* and the *Escorial,* and sent up a great geyser of spray.

"No, they're not firing at us," said Bill, in answer to the girl's whispered question. "They're ranging, and maybe their idea is to scare Hale into surrender."

Gathering speed, the *Escorial* pounded on, until ahead of them Bill saw what he thought was land, but which proved to be a mass of hummocky ice, backed by an irregular formation of isolated bergs.

"He'll not dare drive through that," thought Bill, and the next minute he saw the *Thomas Inland,* which was leading, turn to port.

They were moving towards the warship; Bill wondered why, but now saw that northward there had appeared an almost impenetrable barrier of ice.

"Wireless cabin ahoy!" It was Hale's megaphone roar. "Send a message to those warships that if they attempt to board the *Escorial* I will blow up the ship!"

Bill had almost forgotten the function of the cabin, but this reminded him. Leaving the girl in his place, at her urgent request, he began to feel out in the ether for the ships of war, and presently he caught the signals of the American.

"The captain says that if you approach too closely he will blow up the ship."

"Who is that speaking?" came the answer, and Bill gave particulars about himself and his party. "Is the ship ahead of you the *Thomas Inland?*" was the next question, and he replied in the affirmative.

"Am signalling tanker that if she does not stop shall destroy her," said the American.

Bill, before all things, was a patriot.

"For heaven's sake don't!" he rapped the message furiously. "She is carrying interest on America's loan to Europe!"

The captain of the American, excellent patriot as he was, had evidently a soul above money. Again that lazy cloud of smoke from the warship's side, a droning whine that rose to a shriek, and the bridge of the tanker burst into sudden flame, and, when the smoke had cleared away, the ship was out of control, broadside on, and only Harvey Hale's supreme seamanship averted a collision.

Bill rattled the transmitter key surely.

"Tanker hit amidships. Bridge carried away. There may be fire on board. She is out of control."

He received a "thank you" from the three warships almost simultaneously. And now one, which proved to be the *Sussex*, was moving ahead of her companions, smoke bellowing from her stacks.

"She's under forced draught," said Stone, and dodged just in time.

A bullet ripped through the window and splattered against the iron casting. Bill snatched up his pistol and jumped on to the table, but the sniper was not visible, and had probably taken advantage of Stone's preoccupation.

Nearer and nearer the warship approached, and, examining her through his glasses, Bill saw that there was no vestige of human life on her decks. She was cleared for action, four long guns swung menacingly towards the liner.

Beneath them the deck of the *Escorial* quivered and trembled. She, too, was working up to her top speed, and the water curved in two high waves from her bows. The ticker was chattering furiously. Bill took up the receiver and listened.

"Is there any danger that captain of the *Escorial* will carry out threat to sink vessel?"

Bill thought for a moment, and tapped "Yes."

"What fuel has she on board?"

"Very little."

A long silence, and then the *Sussex* spoke again.

"Will keep you close order. If necessary shall hole *Escorial* forrard," was the cold-blooded suggestion.

"And they'll enjoy doing it!" groaned Bill.

The Sussex was running on a parallel course, edging closer and closer to the liner. Again the *Sussex* became inquisitive.

"May I blow away bridge?"

Bill did not wait for the message to finish before he tapped an emphatic "No." The bridge was dangerously near to the wireless cabin, and to him there was only one passenger on the *Escorial*, and that was Betty.

"Lord Lowbridge prisoner in chart-house," he added, glad to find an excuse.

There was a blur of grey on the horizon ahead—fog! Harvey Hale had seen that patch and was racing towards it with his heart in his mouth. They had long since left the *Thomas Island* astern, and, looking back, he could see she was being boarded.

"Keep her nose to that fog. Maybe it will be twenty miles thick and we'll dodge these brass-bound. . . ."

Whatever plans he had made were subjected to a slight alteration. He heard Bill's voice yelling from the radio house.

"The captain of the *Sussex* orders you to take a southerly course. If you enter the fog-bank he will 'close' you."

Harvey Hale looked round at the warship. Despite his own speed, she was keeping level with him, probably going a little faster, but he had to economise fuel. He could not hope to reach the fog before the "closing" occurred, which meant that she would be steaming within a dozen yards of him, and the one danger he feared at that moment was the advent of a boarding party.

Nor was the *Sussex* the only danger; the American war vessel was also running under forced draught and was overhauling him on his starboard side. Sandwiched

between those two grey devils of the sea, there was no hope of escape. If the Yankee "closed" there would be ungentle work.

He made another calculation; the fog was five miles ahead, but less distant on his starboard side, for he had unconsciously dipped into a bay, or else the fog had formed whilst he was on the run.

Suddenly the *Escorial* heeled over, and, turning sharp to port, ran across the bows of the American vessel, which was now so near that, to avoid the risk of a collision, her captain had to turn hard to port, incidentally masking, in the most effective manner, both the objective and the guns of the *Sussex*. Before the ship could straighten out, the *Escorial* had gained a mile. The fog had come out to meet them, a thin, tenuous mist, that thickened with every yard they travelled, until the bridge was no longer visible.

"This is where trouble is coming," said Bill.

It came in an unexpected fashion. He was in the midst of receiving a message from the warships when the instrument went dead.

"They've sent a man up the mast to cut the aerial. I wonder they hadn't thought of it before," said Bill.

It had been cold before, but now it became intense, and this sudden drop in the thermometer was a serious matter. The fog and the fall in temperature could only mean the proximity of an iceberg of unusual size; and when he heard the engine bell clang he knew that Harvey Hale had also recognised the danger, and was slowing down. What direction they were taking it was impossible to discover. Nothing was more certain than that the big man would try to double back on his pursuers. He had gauged the depth of the fog, and must know that there was less danger on the northward track than to the south or west, for he had seen the open sea where the fog now was.

For the moment Holbrook was most concerned with the danger to his own little party. Harvey Hale would take full advantage of the fog-bank, and he was not left

long in doubt as to this. The crash of a battering-ram on the door told him that the end was very near. The second blow gave the attackers their entry. Bill shot down the first and second men, but before he could fire again, he was borne down by the rush of unsavoury bodies, and fell, struggling, on the floor of the cabin.

"Don't hurt the girl!" Harvey's voice came from the deck outside. "Hurry it, you awkward swabs!"

"Got him, Captain!" gasped somebody, and Bill, bleeding and bruised, was hauled out on to the deck.

One of Hale's ears was covered with a dressing. Bill's shot had not gone so wide as he had feared.

"Take him up to the chart-house, where I can see him," stormed Hale. "You Yankee swine, I'll teach you to play monkey tricks with me! Up with him!"

Bill was dragged up to the bridge and flung into the empty chart-house.

"Tie his hands," said Hale. "And, young lady, if you give me any trouble, you'll be sorry sooner than you expect. You'll be sorry enough, anyway," he grinned, and leered into her face. "You're one of the best pieces I've seen for a long time, and old Harvey ain't so old that he can't appreciate a pretty wench when he sees one!"

Where was Clive? Almost as if Bill had spoken his thoughts aloud, Hale answered him.

"There's your pal," he said, and pointed to the inner room, where the captain had had his quarters.

He dragged open the door and they had a momentary vision of Clive Lowbridge, lying on a bed, trussed from head to foot, and his face distorted with anger. Another second and the door was closed.

"You people are going to be useful to me—all of you," chuckled Harvey, and, pouring out half a glass of raw whisky, drank it down with gusto. "If you've got any idea that them naval men are going to help you, get it

out of your nuts! There ain't anything in heaven or hell that can pull you through *this* trouble, believe me!"

Soon after he swaggered out on the deck to consult the watch, and when he came back he was accompanied by three men, who carried bulging pillow-cases, which they emptied on the table. Bill looked in amazement. There were ropes of pearls, diamonds, brooches, magnificent wristlets, and mixed with these, bundle upon bundle of American currency, thick wads of French francs, and a miscellaneous collection of gold.

"I guess we've lost the money that was on the *Thomas Inland*," he said, "but there's lashings on this ship to keep us all in luxury."

He opened the captain's safe and thrust in the jewellery. The money he stuffed away in one of the pillow-slips.

"And I can tell you this," he said, addressing Bill, "that there is another half a million that we got out of the post, and, what's more, only three-quarters of the Treasury money went on board the *Inland*. There's enough left to make this worth while when we scupper you, and leave you for these Navy men to pick up."

There came at this second a dramatic interruption. An oil-covered man dashed into the cabin, his face streaked blackly.

"What is it, Snell?" asked Hale sharply.

"Captain, the juice has gone——"

Hale clapped his hand over the engineer's mouth and thrust him outside, pulling the door closed behind him.

"They're running short of oil," said Stone in an exultant whisper. "That means that he'll be forced to stop!"

Bill shook his head.

"They have I don't know how many hundreds of tons in the cargo," he said. "The purser told me yesterday. He wondered who was shipping heavy oil to the United States, and suggested it was a lunatic. It is only a question of hours before they'll tap enough to carry them clear of pursuit."

"But where can they go now?" asked the girl. "Didn't you tell me that the little ship was intended as a sort of lifeboat for them.

Bill was silent. This fact had not occurred to him. The capture of the *Thomas Inland* changed the situation, and Hale's plans must undergo a radical transformation. He could no longer abandon the ship in the Arctic Sea; he must make some port, and make it under the escort of warships. His alternative was to reach some inhabited coastline and take to the boats in the night, trusting to reach land with his loot. Thinking the matter over, Bill decided this was the course that Hale would take, and that the signal for his leaving the ship would also be the signal for the destruction of the superfluous members of his party.

The fog was thinning, but the vessel still went dead slow. An hour later, they emerged into a sea which to Harvey Hale's mind, was beautifully free from warships. The *Escorial* was now moving north-west. Hale believed that it was possible that, by circumnavigating the fog-bank, he could shake off his pursuers and lead them along enough to make the Canadian coast. His main plan was to fall in with some small trading vessel, and, on the excuse that he needed assistance, to board the smaller ship, take possession, and leaving the *Escorial* to its fate, make his getaway. That he contemplated without a qualm the destruction of three thousand lives was an incredible fact. The rope had been spun that would hang him; he had no illusions as to the outcome of the adventure if he faced an Old Bailey jury. No excuse he could offer, no proof that he acted under the instructions of others, would rescue him from that quick trap in Pentonville Prison where pirates are hanged, since Execution Dock is no longer a fashionable place for the dispatch of seafaring miscreants.

For the time being he grasped at the straw of deliverance which his luck offered to him. With Stone and the reporter as hostages, he might yet avoid a conflict which could not fail to end unhappily for himself. Whole-

sale death bulked very small by the side of his own imminent peril.

When Hale returned to his prisoners he was in high spirits, inclined even to take a good-humoured view of Bill's bad shooting. And, as usual, his elation was expressed in a very favourable view of his own extraordinary qualities.

"There isn't another man in the world," he boasted, "who could have slipped that crowd of sleuths. Did you see what I did, Holbrook? Turned ninety degrees across their path? And mind you, even if that skipper hadn't had the sense to pull up, I'd have got away with it. Yes, sir, you could search the world for Harvey Hale's opposite number, and you'd have to admit that he doesn't live!"

He pinched Bill's neck suggestively.

"That's a good throat for cutting, young fellow. By God, it's going to be cut, unless you're lucky!"

Suddenly he broke into a fit of laughter.

"All you boys and girls ought to be together," he said mockingly, and, unlocking the door of the captain's suite, he invited them into the room where Clive Lowbridge lay, inert and helpless.

"Good looking fellow, ain't he? I'll tell the world he is! Member of the aristocracy, too!" he gibed. "You can sit here and keep him company, but I'll cut the throat of anybody who attempts to unlash him! Maybe I won't be so rough with you"—he was ogling Betty—"because you're going to be my sweetie!"

He went out through the chart-house, laughing as at a good joke. Harvey Hale had found a new interest in life. Betty crossed to the bed and laid her cool hand on the prisoner's forehead.

"Are you very badly hurt, Clive?" she asked anxiously.

He shook his head.

"No, I'm uncomfortable, and I doubt if it would be wise to loosen me—yet. Have you a knife, Holbrook?"

Bill shook his head, and exposed his manacled hands.

"He treated me very decently at first, until after he

had murdered poor Laffin," Clive went on. "It was when I protested against that awful crime that he had me tied up and put in here. I suppose he's shaken off the warships?"

"For the time being," said Bill, by nature an optimist.

"I don't think it matters very much whether he has shaken them off or not," said Clive. "This devil will not think twice about blowing up the ship. He says he will burn it to the water's edge, and I believe he will."

Bill was examining his bonds.

"I could loose them for you," he said.

Clive hesitated.

"I don't wish you to take any additional risks, but I'd hate to stop you doing it!"

Bill had an unusual knowledge of knots and hitches, and at the end of ten minutes' work he had left Clive's bonds to all appearance very much as they were when he had started on them, but with a difference.

"You can practcially shake yourself free when you feel like it," he said.

He left Stone talking to the prisoner, and walked across to where Betty was sitting.

"Are you dreadfully frightened?" he asked in a low voice.

She shook her head.

"No, I'm not very frightened. Billy, I have a plan—I wonder if I could get on to the bridge?"

"Why?" he asked, and then his eyes fell on her bag, which was still in her hand, and Bill uttered an exclamation.

"Didn't they take it away from you?" he asked.

"No. Will you have it? I don't think I could possibly use it."

She opened the bag and put the little Browning into his hand. Bill was still wearing his steward's uniform, though he had stripped the moustache from his lips at the first opportunity. He thrust the pistol between his shirt and trousers, and covered the hilt with the bottom of his brass-buttoned waistcoat. His own bonds were not

easily got rid of. The handcuffs were too small to allow him to slip his hands free, but there was sufficient play to make the Browning a very practical assistant if the worst came to the worst.

"I'm not a bit frightened, only I am surprised at myself," she went on. "Somehow, this blustering, murdering bully of a man isn't half as terrifying as the doctor. Billy, I can't be sorry he's dead. I know it's unnatural and unwomanly, but he was the real shadow over my life, and all others seem so insignificant by comparison."

Turning her head, she saw Clive's eyes fixed upon hers.

"What are you conspirators discussing?" he asked, and, without waiting to hear her reply: "I hope they haven't hurt poor old Benson. There's a good servant lost to somebody. Yet if he knew I was going to be executed by these brutes, he would have no other thought than as to the most suitable costume for the occasion!"

They had run into the fog again; the speed of the ship had been reduced, and through the portholes that looked out on to the bridge, Bill could see the whiteness swirling over the ship's side.

"Hale won't like this," he said. "There's a chance that he'll blunder into the warships."

Apparently the captain was not greatly concerned, for he appeared soon after.

"Come out and see the pretty fog, young lady," he mocked. "You and me have got to get acquainted!"

He took her arm in his and led her through a doorway. Bill, following her, saw that she went willingly, and remembered that she had expressed a wish to go to the bridge. Looking over his shoulder, Hale saw him.

"I don't want you!" he bellowed.

"I'm interested in the pretty fog, too," said Bill coolly.

For a moment the man drew back as though he were going to strike him, but evidently Hale detected some humour in his remark, and, without another word, he took the girl's arm again and they walked out on to the broad bridge.

"What is that, Captain Hale?" Her voice was surprisingly sweet and gentle. She pointed to one of the brass telegraphs, and he explained its function.

"And that is the compass?"

Bill could only listen, aghast, to the change in her tone.

"That is the compass, young lady, by which we'll get away from the boys in blue."

"And what is that?" She pointed to a loosely hanging line.

"That's the siren—we call that a foghorn. And——"

Suddenly she thrust him back and, leaping up, caught the line and held on to it. A terrific, thundering shriek of sound broke the stillness.

THE MAN IN CONTROL

With a roar of rage, Hale sprang at her and tried to wrench her loose, but she clung desperately, and the thunder of the siren drowned all sound until he pried her fingers away.

"You little devil!" he hissed, his face white with fear.

Bill's hand closed on the butt of his pistol. If that raised fist had half descended, Hale would have been a dead man. Instead, he flung her back against the reporter.

"Go inside," he said, "and pray to your God that they do not find us! If they do, it will be hell for yours!"

"I did it, I did it!" she gasped, as Bill led her back, trembling with excitement, to the inner cabin. "I made up my mind to do it. As soon as I came on to the bridge I saw the rope, and I guessed that it was the foghorn. Oh, Billy, they must have heard us if they're anywhere near."

Zoo-oom!

The faint sound of a distant siren came to them, and Bill held his breath.

Zoo-oom!

From another direction, and nearer. The warships were also in the fog.

Hale came stamping in, livid with rage, inarticulate. He could only shake his fist at the calm girl and bubble hideous threats which she could not hear, even less understand. The ship was going full speed again. He was careless of bergs or of any other danger. The big man was forcing the liner through the fog-belt. They passed within a stone's throw of a huge white cliff of ice, so close that Bill could have tossed a ball amidst its fairy-like finials. Faster and faster, hour after hour, whilst the fog held, and the lookout at the bow bellowed warnings: "Ice on the left. Ice on the starboard bow. . . ." The mighty vessel, like a giant snake, slipped and slid amidst cold death. And then again the fog melted to the thinnest of mists and vanished altogether.

"Out of it!" roared Hale exultantly. "Slipped 'em! Harvey Hale did it!"

To the right of him was fog again. Into that he would penetrate and lie snug. The fog was a horizon away, but easy going for the *Escorial*. He calculated he had left his pursuers ten miles in the rear. They were commanded by naval officers, fearful of injuring their ships and the court-martial that would follow. They would crawl and creep from berg to berg, the quartermasters in the chains swinging their lead continuously. They would not take the risks taken by Harvey Hale, the finest seaman of all the world, who handled a fifty-thousand ton liner with the ease that another man might handle a motor-boat, and had sent her at top speed through ice and fog, with her three thousand passengers and hands quivering in dread below.

"Harvey Hale did it!" He roared the words.

He had done something that future generations of seamen would talk about; his great face went purple at the inward contemplation of his achievement.

And then a voice of terror shouted his name, and he looked back. Three war vessels abreast were coming out of the fog, and steaming at full speed!

"We've got to run for it," said Hale. The hand on the telegraph trembled slightly. "Don't turn her!" he yelled,

as the helmsman brought the ship over to port. "Give them our stern, damn you! You saw what they did to the *Inland*—blew her bridge up! Let 'em blow the ship endways. There's safety there." He pointed to the fog ahead, but it was thin. He saw that long before he reached the first outliers of mist, and, deep as he could penetrate, he could, looking back, see the smoke of the pursuing warships. To double now was impossible; he must keep straight on. "How's her head?"

"Due south, Captain," said the individual at the wheel.

He nodded. If he could only reach the night! This cursed, never-ending daylight, that showed a ship as plainly at midnight as it did at midday! If he could only reach night! But night lay twenty-four hours sailing south of the line he traversed. In half that time he might find a few hours of darkness, and, steaming without lights, evade his enemy, but half a day was twelve hours.

Bill was right when he said that the man had a supply of fuel on board—not enough to carry out his new plan, which was to sail from pole to pole and seek the seclusion of the eternal night in the Antarctic—a bold scheme, worthy of a Harvey Hale. If that old fool Laffin had only thought of that! It would have been so simple. The trade routes of the South Atlantic are few and sparsely used. Clear of a point west of the Cape of Good Hope and he could strike the southern night that would give him three months' security. That idea was impossible now; he must make for the coast of Canada, and chance finding a ship that would take him and his party to safety.

He looked back again; the ships were now at his heels, and were spreading, this time the *Kent* to his right and the American to his left. They would call his bluff and close him. He sent for the drunken mate who had sailed with him before and who was now his chief assistant.

"Stand by to flood ship," he said.

"Eh?" The mate frowned. "What do you mean, Harvey, 'flood ship'? You're not going to sink us, are you?"

"Do as I tell you!" snarled Hale. "Is that aerial repaired?"

"Yes."

"Send a message to the skipper of the Yankee. 'If you come any nearer I will flood ship.' "

"You can send any message you like," said the mate gruffly, "but you're not going to flood this damned ship! I'm not a ringleader in this hold-up, the most I'll get is five years, and you can bet——"

So far he got when Hale struck him down, and, lifting the dazed figure from the deck, dashed him against the chart-house.

"You swine!" he hissed. "Will you do as I tell you?" He raised a fist threateningly.

"All right," muttered the bruised and bleeding man.

Hale looked back at the *Kent*. From her mainmast floated a small Union Jack, an ominous sign. It was her battle-flag, flown only by a British cruiser when she is entering action. She was creeping up to him on his port. He roared down to the radio house.

"Tell him we've got that girl Stone in the chart-house!" he shouted.

Bang!

He did not see the splash of the shot, but felt the vessel quiver and yaw involuntarily.

Bang!

The second gun was from the American, who was nearer, and this time the *Escorial* staggered.

"Turn a few points starboard," cried Hale hoarsely.

The quartermaster spun the wheel, but the ship did not answer.

"Rudder's gone, sir," he said.

The *Escorial* was yawing from left to right, and now, taking a definite course, circled to port, as though it were involuntarily trying to emulate the earlier manœuvre of its captain. The rudder gone! Hale's jaw dropped. He flung open the door of the chart-house and strode in.

"You people are within three minutes of hell," he said briefly. "Get down below, all of you boys."

He bundled them out one by one, and Bill waited.

"You'll stay here," said Hale, pointing his grimy finger at the girl. "Here you'll stay, my beauty. And you too," he looked down at Clive. "There's plenty of time yet. We're going round in a circle and we'll continue going round in a circle. They've shot away our rudder, but they can't get any nearer. If they think I'm going to ring the engines astern, they're going to have another guess coming! Get!"

"I'm staying here," said Bill calmly.

With a scream of anger the man's fury broke forth. As he leapt, Bill fired once, but the fury of the attack was such that he was thrown off his balance before he could pull the trigger for the second time. In another instant he was on the floor, with the man's knee on his chest and the huge hands about his throat. He struggled desperately, and might have been killed, had not the girl come to his assistance.

"Clive, Clive!" she screamed.

Clive rose to his feet and pulled at his bonds. As he reached the pistol that had fallen from Bill's hands, Hale turned and saw him, and, with a squeal of fear, flew out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Bill, manacled as he was, was the first to follow. A man on the bridge tried to intercept him, but, dodging, he dashed down the ladder to the boat deck as Hale disappeared from view in the opening of the companion-way. He caught sight of him leaping into the main entrance of the saloon. A shivering steward saw him and stared aghast.

"Where did he go—the captain?" asked Bill breathlessly.

"Down to D. deck," said the man.

Before he could frame a question, Bill had jumped to the next landing. He saw Hale dart into the Stones' suite and followed. The private sitting-room was empty. He tried the door of Stone's room. It opened and he rushed in. There was nobody there. Betty's room was locked. He rattled at the door.

"Open, Hale! The game's up—open!"

There was no reply. Putting his shoulder to the door, he tried to burst it in . . . then suddenly everything went black. . . .

When he recovered he was lying on the floor. He guessed he was in Betty's room, because he smelt the perfume that she used, but the portholes were heavily covered with curtains, and the room was in complete darkness. There was another scent, a pungent, familiar odour that he recognised without being able to define. He put his hand to his head; it was wet and sticky, the hair matted. When he tried to move, the pain was excruciating. Somebody had roughly bound his ankles together and the manacles were still on his wrists.

He was not alone. Though he could hear and see nothing in the darkness, instinctively he knew that there was somebody in the room with him. He stretched out his hand and touched a coat. Somebody was lying in a similar plight—worse perhaps, for when he pressed against the shoulder of the man with his hands, he did not move.

The ship was still under way, still, he guessed, moving in circles. And yet, from time to time he could have sworn he heard the boom of distant guns. Perhaps it was only his imagination.

He must have swooned with weakness and pain, but when he again recovered consciousness, his first thought was of the ship. The thud of the turbines came to his ears.

"Still moving," he said drowsily, and then he heard the door open and looked up.

The intruder had taken the precaution of masking all the portlights of the cabin and Holbrook saw nothing, but he knew, by the current of air that came to his face, that the door had opened.

"Who is it?" he called. "I am Holbrook."

There was no answer. He heard quiet breathing, and presently a hand touched his arm, travelled up till it came to his shoulder, and then to his face. A thrill of

horror turned him cold, and he struggled to throw himself clear, but the hand gripped him. Then he heard a faint click, the sound of a clasp-knife being opened, and shouted, striking at the arm of his unknown assailant with a handcuff. But in the position he was held, his blows had no force and were guarded by the forearm and the elbow of the assassin. He heard the quick intake of breath, and guessing that the knife was raised to strike, utilised all his strength to twist out of the grip.

"Anybody there?"

It was a voice outside.

"Help!" yelled Holbrook.

He heard a queer sound, and the hand dropped away from his throat.

"Be careful, he's got a knife!" shouted Bill.

"I want you!" It was Bullott's voice, stern with authority. Bill heard the sound of a scuffle, a thump of a body against the panelling of the cabin and the slam of a door.

"Bullott, Bullott," he called.

"It's all right, son, where are you?"

"Here."

The detective came into the cabin, and, stooping, pulled the half-conscious reporter to his feet.

"There's somebody else here."

"I know," said Bullott's voice. "At least, I guessed. Here's a settee—sit down."

He pulled aside the heavy curtains, letting in the grey light to the cabin, and entered Betty's state-room. Bill heard the curtain rings drawn aside, and presently Bullott came out, shutting the door carefully behind him.

"We're still moving?"

"Yes, we're steering by the propellers. The warships are standing by, they think we've nearly reached the end of our oil, but they're wrong. Did you send them a radio that we were running short?"

"Yes—where is Miss Stone?"

"She's all right." There was something in the tone that sent a shiver down Bill's spine.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Is she in any harm?"

"She's in some danger, not very serious."

"And Stone?"

"They're together," was the reassuring reply. "My young friend, you've had a narrow escape."

Bullott was guiding him along the alleyway to his own cabin. Bill's knees were curiously weak and as he walked he reeled from side to side as though the ship were in a heavy sea. When Bullott got him into the cabin:

"I think I can take those handcuffs off for you. They're English pattern and I have a key somewhere."

He was as good as his word, and they were not in the cabin a minute before Bill was free and rubbing his chafed wrists, whilst the detective bathed the wound.

"Hale, then, is still in control of the ship?"

"No, sir," was the quiet reply. "Harvey Hale controls nothing just now. In fact, he's dead, just now, and if I had to mention——"

"Dead!" said Bill in amazement.

"He was the man lying dead in the cabin with you; didn't you know that? I thought you'd have guessed."

"Then who is in control?"

Inspector Bullott did not reply until he had carefully pinned the bandage he was putting about the reporter's head.

"Tolerably thick nut, this of yours, my friend," he said. "You ought to have been dead. If I remember rightly, that is the second wound you have had."

"Who is in control?" asked Bill again.

"The man in control of this ship at the moment," said the detective cheerfully, "is an old friend of yours, one Toby Marsh!"

BULLOTT MAKES AN ARREST

Bill twisted his head up with an expression of pain.

"Toby Marsh?" he said, not believing his ears.

"That is the gentleman. Very few people are aware

of the fact, but it is nevertheless true, that he is the top man in this ship at this identical moment."

"But how—why?" asked Holbrook, his head swimming.

"There are lots of hows, and a considerable number of whys, which I will explain to you a little later." He looked at Bill sharply. "I wonder if it is safe to take you up on the deck?"

He slipped a long-barrelled pistol from his hip.

"Put that in your pocket, and shoot anybody that doesn't look too friendly. I guess we'll risk it!"

"But tell me, Bullott, what you mean by Toby Marsh being in control? Is he on board? Of course he is! That's a stupid question to ask, but I'm all in a maze. Is he with the gang?"

The detective laughed shortly.

"I should say he was!" he said. "Nobody knows as well as I how much on the inside of that gang Toby Marsh is!"

"Have you seen him?"

"I've seen him."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"Well, no, I haven't spoken to him," said Bullott, "but then, you see, there are very good reasons why I shouldn't. I got into a whole lot of trouble in London through consulting Toby and learnt my lesson."

Bill was glad of the arm of his friend, for he was still dizzy and felt physically sick. The cold Arctic air revived him. They were alone on the promenade deck—the most daring of the passengers were those who at that moment were not at their prayers.

"I wouldn't advise you to go on the boat deck," said Bullott grimly. "In fact, you'll be wise if you stay near the entrance to the social hall, ready to jump. Somewhere in the bowels of this ship is a fire emergency control," he went off at a tangent.

Bill was looking aft. He could see no sign of the pursuing warships, and, guessing his thoughts, Bullott explained that they were only visible from the other side.

"And a long way off, I can tell you, my friend," he said. "You see, this packet has more stamina than a battleship. They can, by running under forced draught, keep up with us for a time, but the farther we go, the bigger the distance between us."

"What were you talking about—the fire emergency control?"

"All these big ships are fitted with them. There is less danger from fire in oil-burning ships than in coal-burners, and an easier way of putting a fire under."

Bill groaned.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I want to know, is Miss Stone safe?"

"Perfectly safe, I think," said the detective.

"How long can we go on like this?"

"For another three days," was the surprising reply. "We've got that much oil."

A man came flying along the deck and Bill recognised the acting engineer whom he had seen on the bridge earlier that day. He saw him fly up the ladder to the bridge, and even as he disappeared, the turbines thudded a little more slowly—slower—slower—and finally ceased.

"We've stopped," said Bill.

Bullott looked back in the sea and behaved insanely, for he chuckled and slapped his knee.

"Cross to the other deck," he said, and led the way through the saloon opening.

Now the warships were visible. They were coming up at top speed, and every minute brought them nearer. The *Escorial* was still under way and would continue under way for a quarter of an hour, such was the rate at which she had been travelling. But they were overtaking her at such a speed that, even as Bill watched, there came across the silent waters the faint clang of their telegraph. In ten minutes the warships were alongside, and up over the rails swarmed more sailors, British and American, than Bill had ever seen before. The first to reach the deck was a bronzed officer, revolver in hand.

"Where's the skipper of this little ship?" he asked.

"Forrard, sir. I am Inspector Bullott, of Scotland Yard."

"Good! I had your lamp signal."

He caught Bill's arm and hurried him after the officer.

"But why did we stop?" whispered the reporter.

"The juice went," was the laconic reply. "Remember that safety valve I told you about? Well, some guy turned it, and out into the ocean went three days' supply of excellent heavy oil."

"Those are your men, sir," he broke off, as they reached the bridge deck.

The tatterdemalion crowd that officered the ship made no resistance. Bill opened the door of the chart-house and went in. The inner door was locked, but two brawny naval ratings made short work of the barrier. The room was full of smoke—a bluish vapour curled up from a small oriental brazier placed on the floor in the middle of the room. . . .

Bill Holbrook staggered into the cabin to where, tied to a chair, lay Betty, unconscious. Stone lay, face downward, on a settee, and on the bed sprawled Clive.

"Get them out into the air quick," said Bullott "I'm a fool—I ought to have known something like this would happen."

The air in the room was unbreathable; the men choked as they carried the unconscious figures to the bridge. Bullott alone stayed behind to open the closed portholes and, lifting the brazier that burnt in the middle of the room carried it, holding his mouth and nose, to the bathroom and, flinging it into the bath, let the water run upon it. Only then did he fly to safety.

"A close call," he said, "but if I am not mistaken in the dope, we are in time."

The girl's eyelids fluttered, slowly they opened and she stared up into the strange faces of the naval officers who were overlooking her. Bullott walked to where the two men lay side by side, already showing signs of returning consciousness.

"I want that man for murder," he said, pointing.

BULLOTT'S STORY

THEY dragged Clive Lowbridge to his feet, dazed and drunken with the drug. An ice-wet sponge applied to his face brought him at once to consciousness.

"Your name is Clive George Lowbridge; you are the ninth Baron Lowbridge. I am taking you into custody on the charge of wilfully murdering your cousin, Cyril Francis Lowbridge, by administering poison."

"I think you'll have some difficulty in proving that," said Lowbridge, pale as death.

"Not so much as you would imagine. Sergeant Fanaby!"

A man came forward and, seeing him, the face of Clive Lowbridge became distorted with rage. It was Benson!

"You have been under suspicion since the death of your cousin, and under observation ever since you took this officer into your service," said Inspector Bullott. "He has all the information necessary to convict you, and I need hardly tell you that I am not relying only on that charge."

Heavily ironed, Lowbridge was carried from the deck and transferred immediately to the British cruiser.

"We have twelve hours to wait before the *Thomas Inland* comes up to us, and we can take in enough oil to reach New York," said Bullott, "and in the meantime, when it does arrive, the gentleman who spilt our own supply into the sea, and incidentally brought this ship to a halt, will not be found amongst the greasers."

"You told me Toby Marsh was on board and in control of the ship?"

Bullott nodded.

"The man who knows where to find that safety valve, that could empty the oil tanks in ten minutes, may be said to be in control of any ship! He was so much in control that he stopped her!"

. . . . .

"The whole credit for this discovery will naturally come to me. It should go to Toby Marsh," said Bullott, when they met that night in Stone's chilly cabin, for although they had sufficient oil to run the dynamos, there was not yet enough to give them heat. "It is perfectly true that Toby Marsh quarrelled with the doctor, over a fake burglary which the old man fixed, and which resulted in Toby being sent down to hard labour. And Toby, being naturally of a secretive and somewhat romantic disposition, has given up his spare time all these years to the discovery of the doctor's character. He knew he was a crook; he was anxious to know how much of a crook he was.

"Clive Lowbridge was brought up by the doctor, and taught by him to worship money. Do you remember some copy-book maxims that we discovered wrapped round the clasp of Isis? Those had been torn haphazard from an exercise book in which Clive had written, from the dictation of his tutor, these sentiments, which, at any rate, actuated Dr. Laffin in his dealings with the world. There was no chance of Lowbridge succeeding to the title, until the doctor suggested the removal of the two men who stood in his way. They believed then that the late Lord Lowbridge was a very rich man; he had been left a million, but unfortunately he was something of a gambler. The doctor should have known this, for he had seen him at play, had watched him squander money at Monte Carlo, and thoroughly knew his weakness. Probably Laffin thought that he had so much money that there would still be enough left after his death. As you know, the death of Lord Lowbridge revealed the truth, which was that he was on the verge of bankruptcy when death removed him.

"Then there was opened by accident a new prospect for the doctor. He was crossing Dartmoor one night, when he was held up by two of the Priors of the Sons of Ragousa, of whose existence he had never heard, though he was something of a mystic himself and dabbled in the occult. The news the Priors gave him was that their

Head was ill, and he accompanied them to the Priory, where he found Mr. Leiff Stone, suffering from an attack of angina pectoris. In his delirium, or in a moment of confidence, poor Mr. Stone told him of a repeated vision he had had, that he had seen in a shop window a woman in a green dress with red hair, sitting before a desk on which was a green jade vase and one red rose. He must have then told Laffin that it had been revealed to him that this strange individual had a message for him. Laffin seized upon the idea and in this way worked round to make the greatest profit possible that came from his knowledge. The clasp of Isis, by-the-way, was given to him by Mr. Stone in payment of his services.

"His first step was, through the Prior, to gain a high office in the Twenty-Third Degree; and here it seems that he had already formed in the rough the plan which he had carried out on the *Escorial,* namely, to seize a ship on its voyage. At any rate, he began to fill the Twenty-Third Degree with the scum of the seaport towns.

"Remember this, that he had for Lowbridge a genuine affection. He told him everything, and Lowbridge knew, not only about his adventures at the Priory and the dream of Leiff Stone, but knew also that Laffin intended utilising the Twenty-Third Degree for his purpose. Miss Carew—or as we know her, Miss Stone—was, with the approval of Lowbridge, chosen to act the part of the Messenger, Laffin's object being to obtain possession of the book which held all the secrets of the Order, the particulars of initiation services, passwords, but, more especially, the method by which the half-annual argosies were distributed. That he succeeded, we know. That night, after the book was in Laffin's possession, Mr. Stone was killed."

Bill's hand tightened on the girl's, but she did not flinch.

"The method I do not know. We shall probably discover that aconitine was the agent employed. Now there was one man in whom the Grand Prior reposed implicit confidence—that was Brother John Flanagan, and he was

evidently worried over his friend's delusion about the woman in the green dress, for when he learnt from the Grand Prior that the messenger had been seen and the message received, he came to London to pursue his investigations. Lowbridge shadowed him, and shot him down in the street, because he thought that Miss Stone had told him much more than she really had. After the Grand Prior's death, Lowbridge took his place."

"Not Laffin?" interrupted the astounded Holbrook.

Bullott shook his head.

"No, sir, the new Grand Prior was Lowbridge. The rest of that story you know. The unsuccessful attempt of these scoundrels to induce Mr. Pawter to make a fake draw was nearly followed by Clive Lowbridge's arrest. He escaped, however, with Laffin, his assistant, and was dropped by Laffin at Taunton.

"Toby Marsh had followed Laffin to Bath, whence he took a car to Devonshire and missed him. He was out in the morning early, watching the Bath-Bristol road, when he saw the doctor's car approaching, and with his customary impertinence, held it up. The doctor was furious; he would have made Harvey Hale, who was driving the machine, give our burglar friend a very unpleasant time, but Toby was well armed, and at last prevailed upon the doctor to let him travel with him to Bath, as he had something important to say.

"Toby suspected Lowbridge. The discovery that Lowbridge was not in the car was something of a shock to him. His object in travelling at all was to trap the doctor into an admission that Lowbridge had just left him, and in this he succeeded, for, like most super-clever men, Laffin was childlike in some respects.

"Toby already knew a great deal, having installed a microphone in Laffin's private room, and gradually there came into his possession an almost complete story of what was going to happen on the steamship *Escorial*. But he wasn't satisfied that he was right, and in his furtive way he decided upon securing a job in the engine-room of the ship. He told me about this later—in fact, a

few days before I sailed he revealed as much of the story as he thought it was wise for me to know.

"The point I would make is this, that the leader of the gang, the prime mover, the brain behind every new development, was Clive Lowbridge. He had doomed Laffin from the moment he learnt that the doctor had married his ward, and the fact that it was a mere act of precaution on the part of Laffin made no difference. It was humanly impossible that that vain, half-mad old man should ever come through this voyage alive.

"Scotland Yard suspected Lowbridge, and at a very early stage had put one of their most capable officers in his service. The man called Benson, is, as you know, a detective, who will probably be promoted for the part he has played, before he reaches England.

"After the book was secured, it became again necessary to remove Miss Stone. She had remembered her journey to Devonshire and the transference of the book to her, and that was fatal to their schemes. The mere possibility that she would tell the story to the detective filled them with apprehension, and they determined to remove her without delay. She called at Lowbridge's flat for tea. Lowbridge distracted her attention and put a very quickly acting dope into the cup and was observed by Benson, who changed the cups when his back was turned, with the result that it was Lowbridge who found himself under the influence of the drug.

"I forget the circumstances now," said Bullott, "but I am under the impression that he sent Benson out to get some newspapers, believing that the action of the drug was so quick that the girl would be unconscious and smuggled away into his room before the servant returned, when he would find a further excuse for keeping him out of the way for the rest of the evening.

"The greatest shock that Lowbridge had was to learn that a warrant had been issued for Laffin's arrest on a charge of murdering his uncle. Then, indeed, he knew that the game was nearly up, and that unless he silenced the doctor he could not escape arrest and the scaffold.

Mr. Stone offered him the opportunity of going to America on the *Escorial*. I need hardly say that he would have been on the *Escorial* in any circumstances, for the gang had decided, after the narrow squeak which they had at the hands of Tinker Lane, that no time should be lost. They were, however, in some doubt as to when the British Treasury would ship the interest on the American debt, and this they learnt through La Florette, the dancer. Had it not been shipped by the *Escorial* you may be certain they would have found some reason for postponing, not only their own departure, but the departure of Mr. and Miss Stone.

"I saw my chief at Scotland Yard, put as many facts before him as I knew, and received permission to sail on this ship, although he thought that in all probability a very credulous and inexperienced police officer had heard and believed a fairy story.

"I don't think there is very much more to be told. Toby Marsh was on the ship. I saw him the first day, I spent forty-eight hot hours in his company, and when the Twenty-Third Degree showed their hand, he was a tower of strength not only to me but to the law. Toby rigged up a signal lamp aft, which kept us in touch with the warship after the wireless was in the hands of Lowbridge and his men."

"Who killed Hale?"

"Lowbridge. When Hale saw that the man he had double-crossed was free, he ran for his life. The taking prisoner of Lowbridge was camouflage to protect him if things went wrong. It was an excuse for his being on the bridge to direct operations at a critical moment, without appearing to be a member of the gang. But Hale, who was in fear of him, took advantage of his helplessness to secure him still further. The prisoner waited only long enough to give Hale a chance of settling with our young friend, then he chased both down to the cabin. It was he who struck down Holbrook. Afterwards, he decided that Holbrook alive was a danger and came down to finish him. His plan throughout had been in the event of fail-

ure, to end life pleasantly. The poison pastilles which were burning in the captain's cabin when we broke in, would ordinarily have killed everybody in the room in a few minutes—Lowbridge's luck was out to the last!"

. . . . . .

Eight days later, escorted by a fleet of small craft, the much-travelled U.S.S. *Escorial* came slowly into New York Harbour, and Betty Stone stood, a little overwhelmed by the most wonderful skyline in the world.

Bullott had gone back to England on the *Kent*, and with him his chief witness, Toby Marsh. Bill had sworn many solemn oaths that he would follow by the first available mail steamer.

"So this is America, Billy?" she said with a half-smile.

"It is New York," said Bill, "which isn't exactly the same thing, though there are many who share your illusion. It is of it, but not it!"

His arm was in hers as they leaned on the rail. Mr. Stone looked over his glasses at them for a moment and returned to a study of the early editions which had come out on the pilot boat.

"You must show me the sights, Billy, before we go up to Mr. Stone's camp, and you must coach me in other things. What is the chief advantage of being an American citizen?"

"There are so many I can't think of them," said Bill, "but the first that occurs to me is the facility for rapid marriage. And if you'll let me explain that system to you thoroughly, I'll surely be the proudest son that the ships of Ragousa ever sent forth in search of treasure!"

THE END